

GABORIAU'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

THE
SLAVES OF PARIS.

BY EMILE GABORIAU.

IN TWO VOLS.—VOL. I.

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THE SLAVES OF PARIS.



8th of February, 186—, was one of the most severe days of the winter. Upon Chevalier's thermometer, the favourite Parisian oracle, marked degrees centigrade below zero. The sky was dark and loaded with rain, and the rain of the previous day had frozen on the pavement, rendering locomotion so perilous that both cabs and omnibuses had ceased to run. The city were altogether a most dreary aspect.

The Parisians, as a rule, are not apt to devote much attention to the suffering poor. They fancy, perhaps, that sufficient crumbs fall from the table of a million diners to satisfy the hunger of all the indigent; and yet in winter, when blocks of ice float down the Seine, thought instinctively comes of those who are destitute and shivering, and they are naturally commiserated. So true is this, that on the particular 8th of February, the landlady of the Hôtel du Péron, Madame Loupias, a young woman from Auvergne, actually gave her lodgers a thought, which she previously enough had no connection either with raising their rents or exacting payment of arrears. "How bitterly cold it is," she said to her husband, "I was filling the stove with coal. 'Cold enough to frighten a white rat.' In weather like this I always feel anxious—especially since the other day when we found a lodger hanging to the rafters upstairs. His suicide cost fifty francs, not to mention the sneers and accusations of the neighbours. You really ought to go upstairs, and see what the folks in the attic did to her husband, 'they've gone out to warm themselves.'"

"So?"

"Old Father Tontaine went off at daybreak; and some time ago M. Paul Violaine come down. Rose is the only one who stays in bed. I fancy she has sense enough to stay in bed."

Madame Loupias spitefully, "I've no doubt, but she's certainly mistaken she'll soon be leaving Mother. She's by far too good-looking for such a place."

She lived in the Rue de la Harquette, at a corner of the Rue de la Harquette. There is a touch of cruel irony about the name of the Rue de la Harquette, the synonym of the Rue de la Harquette.

In such a sordid building, having a narrow muddy alley as its front, with windows so grimed with filth, that at a glance the passer-by would rightly judge: "This is the home of poverty and want." At the first look, moreover, the aspect of the house suggests a thieves' den; but this is not the case, for, as times go, it is fairly honest. Indeed it is one of those lodging-places—becoming yearly fewer in number—where shame-faced paupers, folk who have seen "better times," vanquished combatants in the struggle for life, find shelter and a bed in exchange for their last crown. Here they take refuge, like the ship-wrecked mariner on a rock, here they at least have a moment's breathing time, and as soon as strength returns start off anew. No matter how wretched a man might be, it would be quite impossible for him to think seriously of abiding for any length of time in the Hotel du Pérou. By means of frames, covered with sail-cloth and second-hand wall-paper, each storey is divided into a number of little cells, which Madame Loupias dignifies as rooms. The frames are disjointed, the paper is falling into shreds, and yet hideous as these cells are, they seem superb in comparison with the two attics, which merely have sky-light windows, and the ceilings of which are so low that it is almost impossible for the occupants to stand upright. Here the only furniture is a bed with a sea-weed mattress, a rickety table and two chairs. Such as they are, however, the attics are let for two-and-twenty francs apiece per month. But then, as Madame Loupias says, it should be remembered that both of them have chimneys, and this is true—each garret having a hole in the wall, though grate and mantelpiece alike are wanting. However the worthy woman's tenants are not exacting, and in proof of this the garrets are never vacant.

In one of these attics, on that cold February day, we find the young woman whom Loupias called Rose. Her beauty was beyond all question. She was just nineteen; her hair marvellously abundant—dazzled one with golden gleams, and her skin was fair and white. Her lashes attenuated the metallic sparkle of her large blue eyes, while her lips, which on rare occasions disclosed small pearly teeth, seemed only intended for smiles and sighs. Instead of remaining in bed as the landlord had suggested, she had risen, and throwing the soiled, dented counterpane over her shoulders, had installed herself near the fire-place. Why there, you may ask, rather than elsewhere? She could scarcely have hoped to warm herself, for the only signs of fire were two smouldering bits of wood, each as large as one's fist, which expired between them about as much heat as a lighted cigar. No matter Crouching on the dirty rug which Madame Loupias called a hearth rug, Rose shuffled a pack of cards, meaning to consult them as to her future destiny; and, after all, it was only natural she should seek to console herself from the sulkings of to-day by the promises of to-morrow.

She was so absorbed in telling her own fortune that she did not seem to feel the cold which was nipping her fingers. In a semi-circle before her she had disposed the flabby dirty cards, and, in accordance with custom, counted them three by three with her forefinger. Each of those she pointed at, of course, a favourable or unfavourable meaning, and she rejoiced or lamented accordingly. "One—two—three," she was saying, "a fair young man, that must be Paul. One—two—three, favours. One—two—three, ah!—three, pay for me. One—two—three, no, disappointment. One—two—three, play for me. One—two—three, no, sorrow, want, and starvation. Always that nine of spades, that means sorrow, want, and starvation. Always that nine of spades, at every deal!" To tell the truth she looked as if she knew of some impending disaster.

However she speedily recovered herself and set about shuffling the cards again. She carefully cut them with her left hand, spread them out as previously, and began to count once more, one—two—three. Ah! this time the cards shewed themselves more propitious, and carried her off to the fairy realm of hope. "Some one loves you," they said in that particular language of theirs which Mademoiselle Lenormand, so deftly expounded for the benefit of the great Napoleon, predicting Jena and Ansterlitz, and warning him of Waterloo and St. Helena. "Ay, some one loves you—loves you very dearly. You will go on a journey; a letter will reach you from a dark young man—a young man who is very wealthy."

Thus young man was personated by the knave of clubs. "Always the same," muttered Rose, "always that dark young fellow—fate wills it. How can I resist?" At the same time, rising to her feet, she drew from a crack in the wall above the fireplace a letter, folded into a little square, and greatly soiled and crumpled, for it had been perused over and over again. For the twentieth time indeed since the previous afternoon she read as follows:—

"MADemoisELLE, I have seen you and I love you—on my word of honour! The filthy den where you now hide your beauty is no fit place for you. A charming apartment—lemon wood and ebony furniture—awaits you in the Rue de Douai. I am always plain spoken in business matters—the less will be made out in your name. Think it over, make any inquiries you like, my references are all first rate. I am not yet of age, but I shall be so in five months and three days from now, and shall then be able to do as I please with the property left me by my mother. Besides, my father is old and infirm, and by careful statute we might have him pronounced by the courts to be unfit to manage his fortune.

"Shall I warn the dressmaker to be in readiness?"

"During the next five days I shall—from 4 till 6 p.m.—await your decision in my carriage at the corner of the Place du Petit Pont.

"GASTON DE GANDELO."

This ridiculous, revolting letter, well worthy of one of those young idiots whom the Parisians at that time contemptuously called "*petits creces*," did not at all seem to shock Rose. On the contrary she thought it delightful—as charming, indeed, as any sonnet addressed by Petrarch to Laura. "If I dared!" she muttered longingly. "Ah! if I only dared."

For a moment she remained pensive, her forehead resting on her hand, when suddenly a little quick step resounded on the creaking stairs. "He!" she exclaimed, aflighted, "Paul!" and with a movement of alarm, cat-like in its speed and precision, she slipped the letter back into its hiding-place.

She was none too quick, for the very next moment Paul Violaine entered the room. He was a young man of three-and-twenty or thereabouts, of slender build, but in height admirably proportioned. His oval face was of that clear pale cream colour peculiar to certain races of the south. A small silky moustache shaded his upper lip, just sufficiently to impart an air of manhood to his expression. His fair hair curled naturally above an intelligent forehead, and, as a contrast, lent additional lustre to his large black eyes. His handsome features—of a more striking character, perhaps, than even those of Rose—were enhanced by a distinguished air, which rightly or wrongly is supposed only to pertain to those of noble birth. M. de Loupias always pretended that the tenant of her attic impressed on him as much as if he were a prince in disguise. At this moment, however, he, Paul,

but a sorry prince indeed. Clean as his clothes were they told a painful story of poverty: not that poverty which shows itself in the sunlight and lives on public charity, but that far more cruel want which blushes when commiserated, which tries to hide itself and is ashamed to speak. In this arctic temperature he wore a flimsy black dress suit all but thread-bare with use and brushing. True enough, he had in addition a light overcoat, but at the most it would have been fit only for summer wear, having about as much consistency as a spider's web. His shoes no doubt were superbly blackened, but they had plainly trampled far and wide in search of fortune.

As he entered the room he laid or rather dropped on the bed a roll of paper, which he had been carrying under his arm. "Nothing!" said he in a tone of bitter disappointment, "still nothing."

Forgetting her cards on the carpet, the young woman started to her feet. The smile which had lighted up her face, anon, was gone, and she wore a look of utter weariness. "What!" she exclaimed, feigning surprise which she was far from feeling. "what, nothing? Not after all you told me when you went out this morning?"

"This morning, Rose, I hoped, I hoped and told you to believe. But I have been deceived, or rather I deceived myself. I looked on commonplace assurances as positive promises. Here, in Paris, folks are not even charitable enough to answer you with a downright 'no.' They listen to you with an air of interest, place themselves at your disposal but as soon as you are out of their sight they forget you. Words--mere words! That's the only coin at the service of the wretched in this God-forsaken city!"

There was a long pause. Paul was too absorbed with his own thoughts to note the contemptuous manner in which Rose stood watching him. She seemed indignant to find him so helplessly resigned. "Well, we're in a nice position and no mistake," she said at last. "What is to become of us?"

"Ah! do I know?"

"Then it's all over. Yesterday, while you were away--I didn't tell you of it so as not to worry you needlessly--mother Loupias came up and asked for the eleven francs rent we owe her. If she isn't paid in three days she'll bundle us out of doors--so she declared: and she'll keep her word, you may depend on it. Yes, she'll turn us out, and all the more cheerfully as she longs to see me in the streets, for she hates me, the wicked old hag."

"To be alone in the world," muttered Paul, "alone, abandoned, without a relative or friend--without any one to assist me!"

"We haven't a copper left," resumed Rose, with ferocious persistency. "Last week I sold the last clothes I had, save these on my back. There's no firewood left, and we haven't had a morsel to eat since yesterday morning."

Paul only answered these words, which seemed like so many stinging taunts, by clapping his forehead with both hands as if trying to press from his brain some idea that might save them.

"Ah! it's a fine state of affairs," continued Rose, with imperturbable determination. "For my part, I think it would be as well to find some means, to devise some expedient, anything, no matter what--"

Hearing this, Paul hastily threw off his overcoat. "Here," said he, "take this to the pawnshop."

But the young woman did not budge. "Is that all you can think of to help us out of our difficulties?" she coldly asked.

"They'll lend you three francs on it. We shall, at least, have enough to buy some wood and some bread."

"And when the wood and bread have gone?"

"When they've gone? But before—we'll see—I'll reflect, devise something. Everything depends on gaining time. I shall end by breaking through this fatal circle. Success will follow, and with success a fortune. But we must learn to wait."

"Wait! How can we wait?"

"No matter—do what I tell you, and to-morrow—"

Had Paul been less absorbed, he would have divined from the expression on Rose's face that she was determined to provoke him. "To-morrow!" said she, with increasing bitterness of irony. "To-morrow! Always to-morrow! Why we've lived on that word for months. Come, Paul, you are a mere child; it's time you had courage enough to look the truth in the face. What will they lend me on this old coat? Not more than three francs, if that. Now, how long can we live on three francs? Say three days. And then? Don't you understand? You are too poorly clad to be well received. Well-dressed folks are the only ones who are listened to. When a man wants to obtain anything, he ought to look as if he didn't need it. Now, where can you go in your swallow tails without an overcoat? You would look ridiculous—why you wouldn't dare show yourself in the street."

"Be quiet, I beg you," interrupted Paul. "Ah! I see it only too clearly now; you are like everyone else. You look on failure as if it were a crime. Formerly you had confidence in me; you did not speak like this."

"Ah! formerly I didn't know."

"No, Rose, no—it wasn't a question of knowledge, but one of love—you loved me then. Good Heavens! have I not tried everything? I have gone almost from door to door offering my compositions—those melodies you sung so well. I have tried to find pupils on every side. What more would you have done if you had been in my place? Come, tell me."

As he spoke, Paul grew more and more animated, whilst Rose, on the contrary, affected an irritating air of calmness. "I don't know," she said at last; "and, yet, it seems to me that if I were a man I should never allow the woman I said I loved to lack the merest necessities of life—no, never, I would find work."

"I am not a mechanic, unfortunately," rejoined Paul; "I have no manual calling."

"Then I would learn one. What can one earn by carrying a mason's bag? It's hard work, no doubt, but it's not difficult to learn. You have great talents according to your own account. I don't deny it; but if I were a great composer, and had no bread at home, I should go and play in the streets and cafés, go and sing in the court-yards. At all events, I would procure money somehow or other, no matter what it might cost me."

"Rose, you forget that I am an honest man."

"Really! You think I want you to steal! Dear me, that answer of yours is just fit for those who fail to make their way, simply, because they lack skill or nerve. They go about dressed in rags, with empty stomachs and aching hearts, but they draw themselves erect to say, 'I am an honest man.' As if the men who are wealthy were all of them arrant knaves. As if no one could make his fortune without being a rascal! Come, you are really too ridiculous!"

She spoke in a ringing voice, and infernal boldness glittered in her eyes. Plainly enough she was one of those redoubtable, wilful creatures, strong in the spirit of evil, who can lead a weak man to the edge of a precipice, push

him over, and forget him, before he has even reached the bottom. Her sarcasm roused the worst side of Paul's nature. The hot blood of anger mounted to his brow. "Why can't you do something yourself?" he asked. "Why don't you work?"

"I? Oh! that's a very different matter. I wasn't made to work!"

With a gesture of rage, and with uplifted hand, Paul sprang forward. "You wretch!" he cried—"you miserable wretch!"

"No—not a wretch," she answered. "I am only hungry."

Having reached this point, it seemed certain that the quarrel would have some fatal finish, when suddenly an unexpected sound was heard, and caused the young couple to turn round. Their attic door was open, and on the threshold stood an old man, who was watching them with a paternal smile. He was tall, but slightly bowed. His nose was very red, and his prominent cheek bones were almost as highly coloured. But little else could be seen of his face, for he wore a long, uncared-for, grizzly beard. His eyes, moreover, were hidden behind common coloured spectacles, a black ribbon being twined round the iron mountings. Everything in his appearance indicated misery and slovenliness. His greasy, shapeless coat, with its large ragged pockets, bore traces of all the walls it had rubbed against whenever its wearer had imbibed a drop too much. The old fellow was apparently one of those careless bibbers who sleep as comfortably in their clothes on the ground as on their pallet. Paul and Rose recognised him at once. They had often met him on the stairs, and they knew that he lived in the neighbouring garret, and was known as Father Tintaine.

At sight of him, Paul remembered that every word could be heard from one attic to the other, and the idea that the old fellow had been listening fairly exasperated him. "What do you wish, sir?" he asked roughly. "And who gave you permission to come in here without knocking?"

Threatening as was the young fellow's tone, it did not at all seem to offend or disconcert the old man. "I should be speaking an untruth," he answered, "if I didn't admit that, happening to be at home, I just heard you two settling your private affairs—"

"Sir!"

"Wait a bit, impetuous youth! As I was saying, I heard you begin to quarrel, and really, now, I wasn't so much surprised. When there's no hay in the rack, why the best bred horses will fight together. I'm old enough to know all that."

He spoke in a most benignant tone, and seemed quite oblivious of the fact that he was intruding on his neighbours' privacy.

"Well, sir," said Paul. "Then, now you know to what depth of abasement an honest man, when pressed by poverty, may fall. Are you satisfied?"

"Come, come," replied the old fellow. "There you are, losing your temper. If I dropped in, like this, without warning, it was because I felt that neighbours ought to assist one another—especially in such positions as ours. As soon as I heard what your little worries were, I said to myself, 'I must help those young folks out of their trouble.'"

This declaration, this promise of help coming from such a seedy old ragamuffin, seemed so supremely absurd to Rose that she could not repress a smile. She thought, no doubt, that their old neighbour was about to open his purse, and offer them a franc or two—half his fortune, perhaps. Paul had a similar idea; but he, at least, was touched by this simple and yet generous kindness, knowing that the value of money depends upon

circumstances, and that the single franc which keeps a pauper alive for a couple of days is a million times more precious than a thousand franc note to a wealthy man. "Ah," said he, plainly softened, "what can you do for us, sir?"

"Who knows!"

"You see how destitute we are—we need everything. Are we not utterly wrecked?"

Father Taintaine raised his arms to Heaven, as if Paul were guilty of blasphemy. "Wrecked?" said he. "Ah! the pearl lying in the far sea depths—ignorant of its own value—is lost, no doubt, unless indeed some hardy diver finds it. The divers certainly are poor, and not accustomed to adorn themselves with pearls; but then they know their worth, and dispose of them to dealers in precious stones." He finished with a little laugh, the sense of which naturally escaped these young folks, who, albeit eager and covetous, with the seed of evil instincts in their minds, were yet destitute of experience, and ignorant of the ways of the world.

"Well, sir," resumed Paul, "I should be showing misplaced foolish pride if I refused your generous offer."

"Quite right; and as that is the case, the first thing to see to is to procure a good meal. You must have firing as well, for it is bitterly cold here. My old bones are half frozen. By-and-by we'll think of the clothes you need."

"Ah! all that," sighed Rose, "would require a large sum of money."

"Well, and who says I can't provide it?" So speaking, Father Taintaine unbuttoned his coat, and from the inner pocket drew forth a dirty strip of paper, which was pinned to the lining.

"A five hundred franc note!" cried Rose in amazement.

"Precisely, my beauty," answered the old man triumphantly.

Paul did not speak; but had he seen one of the rails of the chair he was leaning against blossom forth in flowers and foliage, he would not have been more astonished. How did such a large sum happen to be in this old ragged man's possession? How had he obtained this note? The idea of a crime, of at least a theft, was so natural under the circumstances, that it occurred to both the young folks at the same time. They exchanged a painfully significant glance, and Paul, losing countenance, flushed scarlet to the ears. The old man had divined their suspicions. "Ah! ah!" said he, without appearing in the least degree shocked, "wicked ideas, eh? It's true that five hundred franc notes don't as a rule crop up spontaneously in pockets like mine; but I came by this one honestly, I can promise you."

Rose was not listening—indeed what did she care for the explanation? The note was there, and that was all she needed. She had taken it in her hands and fingered it as if the touch of the crisp paper imparted the most delightful sensations.

"I must tell you," added Father Taintaine, "that I am employed by a lawyer."

"Indeed."

"Yes, and you ought to feel flattered. People are not often assisted by a lawyer's clerk. My mission, as a rule, is to grind money out of folks, not to help them. I collect debts for several of my master's clients, and it so happens that I often have large sums by me, with a long interval before me to account for them. It can't inconvenience me then to lend you five hundred francs for a certain time."

Paul stood hesitating between the suggestions of want and the qualms of conscience—as moved as is always the case when a momentous decision has to be arrived at. “No,” he began at last; “really, I cannot accept. My duty—”

“Ah, my dear,” interrupted Rose, “that is not worthy of you. Don’t you see that your refusal distresses our neighbour?”

“She is right!” cried Father Tantine. “Come, it’s settled. And now, my pretty one, make haste and fetch the grub. Come, it’s past four o’clock already.”

It was now Rose’s turn to start and blush, as if the old man had guessed her secret. “Four o’clock!” she muttered, thinking of her letter. However she hastened to obey, and going to the old looking-glass, arranged her ragged clothes almost gracefully. Then taking up the bank note, she went off in triumph.

“A handsome young woman and no mistake,” said Father Tantine, with a knowing air. “Quite a beauty, and very intelligent, too. Ah! if she were well advised, she’d make her way.”

Paul offered no rejoinder. He was trying to collect his scattered ideas, and now that Rose no longer influenced him, he felt positively frightened. He thought he distinguished something singularly ominous about the person of the so-called lawyer’s clerk. When before had any one ever seen old fellows of this description offering bank notes to their daughters? Surely this generosity must cloak some mystery, and he, Paul, ought not himself compromised. “Thinking the matter over,” he said firmly, “I feel that it’s quite impossible for me to accept such a large sum from you. Who knows if I shall ever be able to refund you?”

“Good! So now you are doubting of yourself and your own abilities. That isn’t the way to succeed, believe me. If you have so far failed, it is simply because you lack experience. In future you’ll no doubt do better. Poverty, my lad, fashions a man just as straw ripens medlars. To begin with, I have confidence in you. As for these five hundred francs, you may return them at your leisure. I am in no hurry for them, only you must pay me six per cent. interest, and give me your note-of-hand.”

“Like that,” stammered Paul.

“Agreed. I look upon the affair as an ordinary business transaction.”

Paul was such a simpleton that the idea of a note-of-hand reassured him, as if his signature below a bill stamp could serve any other purpose than that of depriving the strip of paper of any such value as it possessed before it was written upon. On his side, Father Tantine rummaged about in his pockets, till at last—just by chance, of course—he came upon a bill stamp which would precisely suit the purpose they had in view. “Now,” said he, “take a pen and write as follows: ‘On the eighth of next June I will pay to M. Tantine or to his order the sum of five hundred and thirty francs (underline, please), value received.’ Now, date; your address, mind, and signature.”

The young fellow was just appending the final flourish to his name when Rose reappeared laden with provisions. She was so radiant, so unlike her usual self, that, extraordinary as the adventure of the bank-note might be, it hardly explained the transformation. Surely something else must have happened to impart that strange expression to her eyes. But Paul gave her no attention. He was watching the old clerk who, after perusing the note, was stowing it away in his pocket with as much care as if it had borne the signature of Rothschild or Oppenheim.

"It is understood, sir," said Paul, "that the date is merely a formality. It is barely likely I shall be able to save enough in four months to recoup you for your kind advance."

Father Tantine smiled benignantly. "What would you say," asked he, "if, after lending you these five hundred francs, I enabled you to pay me back before a month is over?"

"What, sir, you would be able—"

"Ah, my dear fellow, I myself am of little or no account. You can see that for yourself. But I have a friend with a long arm. If I had only listened to him, years ago, I shouldn't be lodging at the Hôtel du Pérou now-a-days. Would you like to see that friend of mine?"

"Would I like to see him! Why, I should be a fool to throw away such a chance."

"Well, I shall see my friend to-night, and will speak to him about you. Call on him to-morrow at noon precisely. If you create a favourable impression, and he decides to help you—why, you may look upon your fortune as made." So saying he produced a visiting card, and handed it to Paul adding, "My friend's name is B. Mascarot, and this is his address."

While this conversation was going on, Rose, with marvellous dexterity, had transformed chaos into order and completed her preparations. The table was spread—a table well worthy of the hotel—set out with broken pieces, whilst the provisions remained in their paper wrappers, there being no kitchen in the establishment. A bright fire blazed away in the chimney, and a couple of candles, one of them in the hotel candlestick, and the other emerging from the neck of a cracked bottle, gaily illuminated the festive scene. In comparison with ordinary aspects, the sight was superb, and Paul looked round him with satisfaction. Business was disposed of, and misgivings had flown away. "Let us take our seats," said he. "What can we call this—breakfast, or dinner? Well, never mind. Come, Rose, to your place; and you, my best of neighbours, I trust you will do us the favour of sharing the repast we owe to your timely help."

But although the feast, as Father Tantine declared, looked very tempting indeed, he begged to be excused. He was not very hungry, as it happened, and besides, he had an important appointment for half-past five, quite at the other end of Paris. "Moreover," said he to Paul, "it is indispensable I should see Mascarot this evening. I must inform him of your visit, and try and influence him in your favour."

Rose certainly did not care for the old fellow's company. Ugly, dirty, and wretched-looking as he was, he inspired her with a feeling of repulsion which gratitude could not overcome. And besides, although she could not see his eyes, she instinctively divined the keen, searching glance which his spectacles concealed—a glance piercing enough to read her most secret thoughts. Still, in a feline way, she begged him with a pretty purr to remain and share the meal. Father Tantine, however, was not to be persuaded, and after once more reminding Paul that it was essential he should be punctual at the appointment on the morrow, he left the room, cheerily exclaiming, "Until we meet again. A good appetite, my friends!"

Once outside on the landing, however—with the garret door closed behind him—the old man paused, leaning on the balusters, and listened. The turtle doves, as he called them, were very merry, and their laughter and babble resounded through the house. And, after all, why not? After frightful anguish Paul had found comparative security. He had the address of a man who might make his fortune in his pocket, and on the corner of the

table lay the change out of the bank-note, a little pile of gold and silver, seemingly inexhaustible in a moment of gay illusions. As for Rose, she could not cease laughing at the thought of the old clerk, whom she set down in her mind as a grotesque old idiot. "Courage, my pretty ones," muttered Father Tantine, "courage! Laugh while you can. 'Twill perhaps be the last time you'll laugh together."

So saying, and with infinite precautions, he descended the rough, rickety stairs, groping his way as best he could in the darkness, for Madame Loupias only lighted the gas on Sundays, mindful of the fact that it cost threepence the cubic yard. Father Tantine did not at once gain the street. Glancing through the glass door of the landlady's room, he perceived her preparing a stew at her stove, and, accordingly, with a timid knock and a low bow he went in. His abject attitude was that of a man accustomed by poverty to the worst of all receptions. "I come to pay you my fortnight's rent, madame," he said, at the same time depositing eleven francs on a side table. Then while Loupias, who could write after a fashion, was scrawling a receipt, he began to talk of his affairs, relating that he had unexpectedly come into possession of a small fortune which would bring him ease and comfort during his declining years. To support these assertions the old fellow, with the pride born of extreme poverty, which fears misbelief, drew forth his pocket-book and exhibited several bank-notes. The sight had such a strong effect on the landlord and landlady, that when the worthy old fellow retired Loupias insisted on lighting him to the door, holding the lamp in one hand, and his cap in the other.

Father Tantine, however, seemed quite indifferent to these attentions, and was evidently absorbed in thought. Reaching the street he looked round him, glancing at the neighbouring shops, and suddenly making up his mind, walked straight towards a large grocery at the corner of the Rue du Petit Pont and the Rue de la Bûcherie. The owner of this establishment was singularly popular in the neighbourhood, thanks to a certain wine he sold—a wine prepared for him by a chemist at Clercy, and retailed at the wonderfully low price of fourpence halfpenny the quart. He was a red-haired red-whiskered man, this grocer, short and fat, and exceedingly irritable and pompous. He was, moreover, a widower, and a sergeant in the National Guard, and answered to the sweet grocer-like name of Melusin. In these poor districts at winter time, five o'clock is the shopkeeper's busiest hour. The workmen are then returning from their daily toil, and the housewives must hasten their preparations for supper. Monsieur Melusin was therefore so busy among his customers, watching his assistants and lending them a helping hand every now and then, taking down orders and giving change, that he did not even notice Father Tantine, as the latter entered the shop, and even had he done so, he would certainly not have troubled himself for such a beggarly looking individual. But on leaving the Hôtel du Péron, the old man had divested himself of his humble, benignant bearing, and stepping at once to the least crowded corner of the shop, he called, in a most imperative tone, "Monsieur Melusin!"

The grocer, much surprised, ran to obey the summons. "Why, the man knows me!" he said to himself, not reflecting that his name shone in gilt letters, six inches high, above the doorway. Father Tantine gave him no time to speak. "I believe," said he, with an air of authority, "that a young woman came here about an hour ago to change a bank-note for five hundred francs?"

"Certainly, sir, certainly she did," answered Melusin; "but how did you know it?" He paused abruptly, clapped his hand to his forehead, and cried, "I have it!—a robbery has been committed, and you are on the track of the thief. And I must acknowledge that I suspected something wrong, when this girl, who certainly looked very poor, came here to exchange the note. I watched her carefully, and I saw that her hand trembled."

"Excuse me," interrupted Father Tantaine, "I have not said one word out of any theft. I merely wish to ask you if you would know this girl?"

"As well as I should know myself, sir. A superb creature she was, I assure you, with hair such as one rarely sees. I have some reason to believe that she lives in a low lodging place in the Rue de la Huchette."

The Parisian shopkeeper is by no means favourably disposed towards those agents of police who report him for any non-observance of regulations, and yet, when it is a question of rendering a service to society by facilitating a criminal investigation, he usually shews himself willing enough, and to promote an important capture will even become heroic—neglecting may be his best customers, and allowing them to go off in a huff, when they find themselves unattended to. This was what happened in the present case. "May say," resumed Melusin, "shall I send one of my boys to the nearest police station for you?"

"By no means," answered Father Tantaine; "and I shall be infinitely obliged to you if you will keep my inquiries secret, until you hear from me again."

"Ah! yes, I understand; an indiscretion just now would alarm them, and put them on their guard."

"Precisely. Only I wish you to allow me to take the number of the note you have preserved it, and I also wish you to enter this number on your books with to-day's date and a note of the circumstances. If possible, I wish to—"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted the grocer, "you may wish to produce my books in court. That is often done—a merchant's books are unimpeachable testimony. You see, sir, I am quite familiar with such matters. Excuse me for a moment; I will return to you instantly."

Everything was done, precisely as Father Tantaine had asked, and with the greatest possible rapidity; and finally Melusin made him a low bow and wished him a courteous "Good evening." He even escorted him to the door, and tarried on the threshold watching his unknown visitor as he strode away. He was supremely happy, the worthy grocer, happy in the consciousness that he had rendered an important service to a high official of the Préfecture de Police who had chosen to disguise himself as a beggar.

But what did Father Tantaine care for Melusin's opinion? Having reached the Place du Petit Pont—he looked eagerly round him as if in search of some one. Twice he made the circuit of the Place, peering into all the secluded corners, when suddenly he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction: he had perceived the person he was hunting for. The latter was a knavish-looking young fellow of twenty or thereabouts, but who appeared at the most fifteen or sixteen years old, being extremely slight of build. He had no chest, and very little shoulders, and his long ungainly legs almost conveyed the impression that he was mounted on a pair of stilts. He was standing at the corner of the bridge known as the Petit Pont, unblushingly looking down of the passers-by, and counting every now and

then to the right and left to make sure that no policemen were "Ger, At the first glance he could be recognised as one of those fungi of the corrupt civilisation, an overgrown "*gamin de Paris*," an ex-urchin of the gutter, who had begun "life" at eight years old drinking potato spirit-drink smoking cigar stumps, picked up outside the cafés. His mud-coloured beard was already scanty, and his complexion of a sickly hue; cynical "chatter" glittered in his eyes, and an ironical sneer curved his hideous, long, sticky lips. He wore a dirty blouse, and having turned up the right sleeve, exhibited a twisted, half withered arm, seemingly deformed and horrible enough to excite the compassion of the passers-by. At the same time he chanted a monotonous refrain in which one could distinguish the words "Poor mechanic—an old mother to take care of—unable to work—injured by machinery."

Father Tantine walked straight towards this lad, and with a cuff on the head sent his cap flying. The young beggar turned at once, evidently enraged, but on recognising his aggressor, he seemed much abashed and dolefully murmured, "Caught!" At the same time, swiftly contracting the muscles of his right shoulder, he untwisted his apparently deformed arm, which proved as sound and healthy as the other one, rolled down his sleeve, picked up his cap, and setting it on his head, awaited further orders.

"So that's how you discharge the duties you are intrusted with," said Father Tantine, severely.

"What duties? They've been discharged long ago."

"That's no excuse! Thanks to my recommendation, Monsieur Mercier procured a good position for you, didn't he? I have often put you in the way of earning money, and you really want for nothing. You promised you would beg no more."

"Forgive me, sir, I meant to keep my promise; but how could I kill time while I was waiting. I must be doing something, sir. It's not my nature to be idle, and at all events, I've earned seven sous."

"Toto-Chupin," said the old clerk, solemnly, "you will certainly come to a bad end; I see this very clearly, and warn you in due season. But let us come to the point. What have you seen?"

They had left the corner of the bridge, and were walking slowly along the deserted quay, past the old buildings of the Hotel Dieu. "Well, sir," replied the young scapegrace, "I have seen just what you told me I should see. At four o'clock a carriage drove into the Place, and stood waiting in front of the hairdressers. Upon my word, I thought it had taken root there! My eyes though, what a turn-out it was! As handsome a brougham as ever I've seen, with a high stepper between two shafts and a coachman in pigskins, and with such a collar! on the box."

"Go on; was there no one in the carriage?"

"Of course there was. I knew him too, by the description you gave of him. Dressed in fine style. Such a hat, such a brim! Light pants cut like umbrella cases, and a coat—a coat, well as short as nothing; but all in the latest fashion, you understand. To make quite sure that I was right, and as it was growing dark, I went close up and took a good squint at him. He had got out, you understand, and was strutting up and down the footway. I noticed the cigar in his mouth wasn't lighted, so up I go, strike a match and say, 'Have a light, prince?' He gave me a ten sou bit, and I had another good look at him. There was no mistaking him. Knock-kneed, shrivelled, short and ugly—a face I should like to pummel, with a bar-nacle in one eye—a monkey, to cut it short."

When Toto-Chupin began a narrative, it was best to let him have his say. It was by far the shortest way of obtaining the information one desired. At last, however, Father Tantaine became impatient. "Well, well! what happened?" he asked crossly.

"Not, much, to be sure. The swell looked hardly pleased at having to wait. Poor dear! He walked up and down, twirling that cane of his, and staring all the women in the face. My nerves could hardly stand it. The conceited whipper-snapper! I wanted to kick him; and if ever you took a fancy to let him have a hiding, remember, Father Tantaine, I'm your man. I don't believe he's half as strong as I am."

"Go on, Chupin; go on."

"Very good. Well, then, he, or rather I should say we, had been waiting there fully half an hour, when suddenly a woman whisked round the corner, and came right up to my dandy. Whew! wasn't she a beauty! Never in your life did you see such eyes: I stood just dazzled. But she was in rags. They spoke to each other in a whisper, and—"

"And you did not hear?"

"What do you take me for, sir? The beauty said: 'You understand me-- to-morrow.' The dandy answered: 'You promise positively?' and then she said: 'Yes, on my word, at noon.' Thereupon they parted. She went back to the Rue de la Huchette, and the other jumped into his cab. The coachman whipped up his horses, and was off in two shakes. He gave me my five francs."

His demand seemed in no wise to astonish the old man. He at once presented the young scamp with a silver crown, saying, at the same time: "When I promise I pay; but remember my prediction, Chupin, you will end badly. And now good night, my lad; our paths lie in different directions."

Father Tantaine tarried, however, on the Place until Toto had disappeared in the direction of the Jardin des Plantes, and it was only when the young rascal was out of sight that he turned round and proceeded to cross the bridge. He walked very fast, and seemed highly satisfied with everything he had accomplished. "I have not lost my day," he muttered. "I have foreseen everything, even what's improbable. Flavia will be pleased."

II.

THE establishment of Father Tantaine's powerful friend was situated in the Rue Montorgueil, within a stone's throw of the Passage de la Reine de Hongrie. B. Mascarot kept an employment office, for employés and servants of either sex. Manuscript bills—on two large boards, nailed on each side of the door of the house—acquainted passers-by with the applications and offers of the day, and above them appeared the announcement, in gilt letters, that the establishment, founded in 1844, was still in the hands of the original proprietor. It was unquestionably to this long continuance, in a proverbially unremunerative profession, that Mascarot owed his reputation, and the high esteem in which he was held, not merely in the neighbourhood, but throughout Paris. It was asserted that no one had ever had any reason to complain of the servants he provided, and in their turn the servants themselves declared that he sent them to the best of places, where they had every comfort and privilege. Clerks and office hands, also,

knew that, thanks to his extensive connection and business relations, he had always a good berth for any one who would take the trouble to please.

But Mascarot had still further claims on public esteem. In 1845 he first conceived the idea of organising a society known as "*Les Gens de Maison*," the object of which was to provide shelter for servants out of place. Defrauded of his idea and programme, he consoled himself by taking a partner named Beaumarchef, and by accommodating, in the same house as his office, all the servants out of place he took an interest in, liberally providing them with board and lodging on credit. If these various enterprises had been of use to the world, they had also benefited Mascarot, who was said to be part owner of the house he lived in—at the door of which, by the way, we meet at noon, on the appointed day, our young friend, Paul Violaine.

He had utilised his old neighbour's five hundred francs, and was dressed with very creditable taste. In fact, he was so handsome in his new clothes, that the women who passed by half turned to look after him; but he gave them little attention. He had been full of anxious thought since the previous evening, and was beginning to doubt the power of this unknown, mysterious personage, who, according to Father l'antaine, could make the fortune of anyone he chose. "An employment office!" he muttered contemptuously. "Surely, at the most he will offer me some situation at a hundred francs per month!"

He was naturally somewhat disturbed at thought of the impending interview, and before entering the house studied its external appearance with no small degree of interest. It was much like the others round about. The employment office, and the entrance to the servants' lodging place were at the back of a courtyard, and within the *porte cochère* stood a pert looking young chestnut vander, with his furnace and various utensils.

"Come," said Paul to himself, "I musn't remain here like this;" and summoning all his resolution he crossed the court, climbed the stairs which faced him, and reaching the first floor, paused in front of a door, on which the word "Office" was inscribed. He gave a loud knock, to which a gruff voice immediately answered: "Come in!" The door was not shut, but simply held in place by a sliding weight at the end of a rope, so Paul at once pushed it open.

The room he entered was precisely like all other employment offices in Paris. On three sides round ran a low oak bench, blackened and polished by time and use, while at the further end was a kind of compartment, shut in by a grating and a curtain of green serge, so as to resemble a Confessional Box, by which name, indeed, the *habitués* of the place usually knew it. On a placard between the two windows, moreover, there ran, in large letters, the inscription: "Register fees payable in advance."

At a square table, in one corner of this apartment, sat an individual, who, whilst jotting down entries in a quarto volume, carried on a conversation with a woman standing in front of him.

"Monsieur Mascarot?" asked Paul, timidly.

"What do you want of him?" rejoined the writer, without rising from his seat or even looking up. "Do you wish a situation? Will you register your name? We have at this moment applications for three book-keepers, a cashier, a corresponding clerk, and six other good positions. Are your references satisfactory?"

These words were spoken with such mechanical rapidity that one might have supposed them learned by heart. "I beg your pardon," inter-

Paul. "I should like to speak to M. Mascarot himself. I am sent here by one of his friends."

This simple statement seemed to impress the indifferent gentleman, who, becoming almost courteous, answered: "My partner is engaged for the moment, but he will soon be at leisure: kindly take a chair."

Paul saw no chair, but seated himself on the bench, and, having nothing better to do, examined the man before him. Tall and athletic, radiant with health and good living, Mascarot's partner wore his hair very short, and under a hooked nose, with wide-spread nostrils, sported a fierce moustache, waxed to a wonderful degree, and stiffened, moreover, at either end into a sharp point. Complexion, carriage, hair, and moustache, all revealed that he had once been a soldier. In fact, he had served, so he said, in a cavalry regiment, where he had gained the nickname he was generally known by—Beaumarchef—his real patronymic being Durand. He was now some forty-five years of age, but this did not prevent him from enjoying the reputation of still being a handsome man.

The woman he was talking with was, judging from appearances, either a cook or a market woman. Of buxom build, and with a rubicund nose, she spoke with the Teutonic accent of Alsace, and punctuated each phrase with repeated pinches of snuff.

"Come," said Beaumarchef at last, "do you really wish for a situation?"

"Yes. I do mean it, and no mistake."

"But you said the same thing the last time you were here, six months ago. We found a good place for you, and being engaged, three days afterwards you threw down your apron, and went off."

"Ay, but then I was in a position to do as I liked."

"And now?"

"And now it's different. I have nearly come to the end of my savings."

Beaumarchef laid down his pen, and looked at the stout woman with a shrewd expression, as if he were seeking for confirmation of some previously conceived suspicion. "You have been guilty of some great folly!" he slowly said.

She turned away her head, and without answering him directly, began to complain of the hardness of the times, of the meanness of employers, and of the rapacity of young married ladies, who did not allow their cooks to do the marketing, and thus secure their little perquisites, but preferred to make all their purchases themselves. Beaumarchef nodded affirmatively, precisely as he had done half an hour previously, when a lady had complained to him most bitterly about her servants. His intermediate position entailed on him this kind of diplomacy.

Meanwhile the stout woman had finished grumbling, and, producing a well-filled purse, drew from it the amount of her fee, laid it on the table, and said: "Please, good Mr. Beaumarchef, register my name, Caroline Schimmel, and try and find me a good place. But it must only be in the kitchen, you understand. I must do the marketing myself, and I won't have the mistress dogging at my heels."

"Very well; we will see what we can do."

"Ah! if you would only find me a rich widower, that would suit me, or a young woman with a very old husband. However, please look out for something, and I will call again to-morrow." Thereupon, taking a larger pinch of snuff than any previous one, she withdrew.

Paul, who had listened, was altogether confounded and humiliated. What could Father Tantaine have meant in introducing him to such com-

pany? No good could certainly befall him in such an office, and really it was not worth his while to wait. He was seeking some decent and plausible pretext for withdrawal, when the door at the end of the room was thrown open, and two men appeared, finishing their conversation before separating. One of them, young and well dressed, had that air and carriage—a certain dash of free and easy ways—which some people mistake for good breeding. The rosettes of several foreign orders decorated his button-hole. The other person, who was an old man, looking like a lawyer, wore a heavy quilted dressing-gown of brown merino, fur shoes, and a velvet cap, embroidered, no doubt, by well loved hands. His thick beard was carefully trimmed, a white choker spanned his neck, and a certain weakness of vision compelled him to wear blue spectacles.

"Then, my dear sir," said the young man, "I may venture to hope, may I not? Do not forget how pressing the situation is."

"I have told you, *Monsieur le Marquis*," answered the man with the white cravat, "that if I were the only master the answer would certainly be yes; but then I am not alone, and must consult my partners."

"Then, my dear sir," rejoined the marquis, "I rely on you."

Paul rose, reconciled to the house by the sight of this young nobleman. The other, thought he, who looks like a lawyer, is no doubt Mascarot himself.

The marquis had withdrawn, and Paul was about to present himself, when Beaumarchef approached the man of legal mien and said, respectfully:—

"Whom do you think I have just seen, sir?"

"Who, eh?—speak," rejoined the other impatiently.

"Why, *Caroline Schimmel*. You know—"

"What! the *Duchess de Champdouce's* former servant?"

"Precisely."

M. Mascarot uttered a joyful exclamation. "That is a positive blessing!" he cried. "Where is she living now?"

This question, natural as it was, overwhelmed Beaumarchef with consternation. He who never failed—since it was one of the rules of the house—to note the addresses of all whose names figured in his books, had absolutely forgotten to ask *Caroline* for her's.

The acknowledgment of this omission so enraged M. Mascarot that he quite forgot himself, and uttered an oath that would have shocked even a London cabman. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "how can a man be such a confounded fool? Here is a woman who for five months we have been chasing from pillar to post—whom I have been searching for throughout the length and breadth of Paris! You know this as well as I do myself; and yet, when the merest accident brings her here, you let her slip through your fingers and disappear again."

"She will come back, sir; she said so. She will not care to throw away the money she paid for her inscription fee."

"She! what does she care for ten sous or ten francs? She will come back when she takes the notion, unless— But no; a woman who drinks, and who is half crazy the best of times—"

But Beaumarchef, inspired by a sudden hope, had hurriedly taken up his hat. "She has only this very moment gone," he exclaimed; "she can't be far, and no doubt I shall be able to overtake her."

He was starting off when M. Mascarot detained him. "You are not the keenest of bloodhounds, my dear fellow. Take *Toto-Chupin* with you: he is sharp enough, and is outside now with his chestnuts. And if you—"

take the woman, don't speak to her, but let Toto follow her unseen, without losing sight of her. I want to know hour by hour what she does. Nothing is too trifling, you understand, to be reported to me."

Beaumarché disappeared, and Mascaret continued to vent his ill humour. "Such a fool!" he muttered. "Ah! why can't a man only do everything for himself. Here I have been wearying myself for months seeking the key to a riddle. That woman knows the truth, I'm sure of it, and yet that idiot Beaumar must let her escape!"

By this time Paul realised that his presence had been unnoticed. Annoyed by his involuntary indiscretion he coughed, so as to attract attention; and at once Mascaret turned round with a threatening look on his face. "Pray, excuse me," said Paul.

But the agent had already regained his benignant expression. "Ah!" said he, courteously, "you are Paul Violaine, I believe!"

The young man bowed. "Excuse me for a moment," resumed Mascaret; "I will return shortly." So saying he disappeared through the door at the end of the room, and Paul had hardly time to collect himself, before he heard his name called. "Come this way—I have no secrets for you!"

He repaired to the outer room, Mascaret's private office was a most luxurious and superb apartment—for it was quite apparent that the windows were occasionally washed, that the wall paper had been recently renewed, and, in addition, there was a carpet on the floor. It was seldom, however, that guests, even those of the highest social standing, were admitted into this sanctum. Current business was usually transacted round Beaumarché's table in the outer room, while more private affairs were talked over in the twilight of the "confessional box."

Ignorant of the customs of the place, Paul could by no means appreciate the extraordinary distinction with which he was received. When he entered, Mascaret, seated in a comfortable arm-chair, was warming himself before a bright wood fire, his elbow resting on his writing-table. Such a table! A world in itself—its aspect plainly indicating that its owner was a man of a thousand different occupations. Books, portfolios, and papers in files rose mountain high, while a larger space was occupied by innumerable small squares of cardboard, on each of which figured a name in large letters, with memoranda in a smaller and almost illegible hand underneath. With a paternal gesture Mascaret pointed to a chair opposite to himself, and in a bland, encouraging voice exclaimed: "Now let us talk."

It was clear that B. Mascaret's patriarchal appearance was altogether natural. The most skilful actor could not have feigned his honest and benevolent expression, the mirror undoubtedly of a pure, untroubled conscience. At sight of him well might a young man exclaim: "I should like to trust my future to his care."

Paul was greatly impressed by this air of honesty and rectitude, experiencing the attraction which is always exercised by strong natures over weak ones. He now fully understood Father Tantaine's enthusiasm, and thanked heaven he had not gone off abruptly as he had thought of doing a few minutes before.

"I am told," began Mascaret, "that your resources are insufficient for your support, or, rather, that you are totally without any, and that you are anxious to obtain a position which will make you independent. That, at least, is what I hear from my unlucky friend Tantaine."

"He has been, sir, a faithful interpreter of my wishes."

"Very well. Only before thinking of the future and entering into a dis-

cussion in regard to the present, we will, if you have no objections, recapitulate the past." Paul started, as Mascarat must have noticed, for he added quickly: "You will excuse the possible indiscretion of this programme, but it is absolutely essential that I should understand exactly what responsibility I am about to assume. Tantaine says that you are a most charming young man—honest, sensible, and well brought up. Now that I see you, I am sure that he is correct in his estimate. But of course I can only deal with certainties, and you will understand that I must be certain of you before I can answer for you to third parties."

"Exactly, sir," interrupted Paul, "and I am ready to answer any questions, for I have nothing to conceal."

A faint smile, unnoticed by the young man, curved Mascarat's lips, and with a gesture to which all who knew him were accustomed, he adjusted his spectacles. "Thanks," he said. "As to concealing anything from me—well, that is not so easy, perhaps, as you think."

He took from his table several of the cardboard squares we have mentioned, and shuffling them through his fingers as if they were a pack of cards, resumed: "You are named Marie-Paul Violaine?" Paul bowed. "You were born at Poitiers, in the Rue des Vignes, on the 5th of January, 1843. You are consequently in your twenty-fourth year, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are a natural child?"

The second question had surprised Paul; this last one fairly stupefied him. "It is true, sir," he answered, without seeking to conceal his astonishment. "But I really had no idea that Monsieur Tantaine was so well informed. I suppose the partition which separated our rooms was even flimsier than I imagined."

Mascarat took no notice of this neat little epigram, but continued to shuffle his bits of cardboard and examine them. If Paul had been nearer, he would have seen his own initials, P. V., inscribed in the corner of each. "Your mother," continued Mascarat, "kept a little thread and needle shop during the last fifteen years of her life?"

"Precisely."

"But what is such an enterprise worth in a place like Poitiers? Not much, to be sure. Fortunately, she received for your support and education an annual allowance of one thousand francs."

This time Paul fairly started. He was sure that Tantaine had not learned this secret at the Hotel du Péron. "Good heavens!" he stammered, "who can have acquainted you, sir, with a secret I have never spoken of since I reached Paris, and which even Rose is quite ignorant of?"

Mascarat shrugged his shoulders. "You may easily understand," he answered, "that a man in my position is obliged to obtain all possible information. If I did not take considerable pains in doing so, I should hourly be the victim of deception, and, in my turn, find myself unwillingly deceiving others."

An hour had not elapsed since Paul had crossed the threshold of the establishment, but he had already learned how much of M. Mascarat's information was obtained; he remembered the directions given to Beaumarchef concerning Caroline Schimmel.

"Although I am inquisitive," continued Mascarat, "I am also discreet. So do not fear to answer frankly. How did this annuity, mother?"

"Through a notary in Paris."

"Ah! Do you know this notary's name?"

"Not in the least," answered Paul, who by this time was growing uneasy and restless. A thousand vague apprehensions were aroused in his mind, although he could not see either the utility or the bearing of any of these questions. The explanation that had been offered was not in any degree satisfactory, for it was hardly possible that all these facts could have been gathered together in one morning. Still, nothing in Mascarot's demeanour justified Paul's misgivings, for the agent seemed to ask all these questions in a mechanical, matter-of-course sort of way, as if they had no interest for him save as a business affair.

It was after a long pause that Mascarot spoke again: "I am inclined to believe," he said, "that it was your father who sent this money."

"No, sir, you are mistaken."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Simply because my mother swore to me, and she was an absolute saint, that my father died before my birth. Poor mother! I loved her and respected her too much to question her on these points. One day, however, impelled by a miserable curiosity, I did venture to ask her the name of our protector. She burst into tears, and I realized the cruelty and meanness of my conduct. That name I never learned, but I know that it was not my father."

Mascarot pretended not to perceive his young client's emotion. "Was not this pension continued after your mother's death?" he asked.

"No, sir; it ceased, in fact, when I came of age. My mother warned me that this would be the case; it seems to me as if it were only yesterday when she spoke to me about it. It was one evening, and, as it was my birthday, she had prepared a better supper than usual. 'Paul,' she said, 'when you were born, a generous friend promised to assist me in bringing you up. He has kept his word. You are twenty-one, and you have nothing more to hope from him. You are a man now, my son, and I have only you to rely upon; work, be honest, and remember that your birth imposes on you double obligations.'"

Paul paused, overcome with emotion. "Ten months later," he resumed, after a moment's silence, "my mother died suddenly—so suddenly that she had no time for a last word of love or counsel. I was left alone in the world, without friend or relative. Yes, I am quite alone. Were I to die to-morrow, there would not be a human being to follow me to my grave. I might disappear from the face of the earth—no one would search for me, for no one knows of my existence or cares whether I live or die."

Mascarot looked very sad. "Not quite so bad as that, young man, not quite so bad, I trust. You have one friend—"

Here Mascarot rose, as if he wished to conceal the emotion he could not control, and walked up and down the room, pulling at his velvet cap, as he always did when occupied in serious meditations. After a few moments' exercise of this kind he halted abruptly in front of his young client, and, folding his arms, exclaimed: "You have heard me, my young friend, and I will not carry any further a series of questions which it can only pain you to answer."

"I thought," answered Paul, diplomatically, "that it was only in my interest that you questioned me."

"You are right. I wished to measure you, to judge of your veracity, as well as of your intelligence. Why? you ask. Ah! I cannot tell you that just now; but you will know at some future time. For the present, rest

assured that I am perfectly well aware of everything that concerns you. You ask how? That again I cannot tell you. Put it down to chance. Chance, you know, has a great deal to answer for."

Up to this moment Paul had been simply puzzled. But these ambiguous words caused him such absolute fright that his face wore a ghastly look.

"Are you alarmed?" asked Mascarot, straightening his spectacles, through which he saw wonderfully well.

"Frankly, sir," stammered Paul, "I am somewhat disturbed."

"Why? I ask you what a man in your position can possibly have to fear. You need not rack your brain any longer; you will soon find out what you wish to know, and you had best, therefore, quietly give yourself up to me, for I have no desire but to be of service to you."

He said this in the sweetest and most reassuring manner, and then re-seating himself in his arm-chair, added: "Now let us speak of yourself. Thanks to the devotion of your mother, who was, as you justly say, a good and holy woman, you were, at the price of numberless privations, enabled to study at the college of Poitiers, like any lad of family and position might have done. At eighteen you passed the 'bachelor's' examination successfully. Then for a year you idled under the pretence of waiting for an inspiration from heaven as to your future career, and finally, as nothing turned up, you entered a lawyer's office as clerk—am I not right?"

"Precisely—"

"But your mother's dearest dream was to see you established near at hand, at Loudon or at Civray. Perhaps she hoped for further aid from the friend who had already done so much for you."

"I always thought so," said Paul.

"Unfortunately for her hopes, however," continued Mascarot, "you had no leaning towards writs and red tape—"

Here Paul smiled, and in doing so seemingly offended Mascarot, for the latter added severely: "I said 'unfortunately.' And I think you have suffered enough by this time to be of my opinion. Instead of engrossing at your desk, you did what? You trifled away your time dabbling in music; you composed songs, and even an opera, I believe; and were not far from considering yourself a genius of the first water."

Paul, who had so far submitted to everything without rebellion, was sorely touched by this sarcasm, and tried to protest, but in vain.

"In short," continued Mascarot, "one fine morning you abandoned the office, and declared to your mother that, while waiting until your fame as a composer was established, you meant to give lessons on the piano. But you could not obtain any pupils, and you were a simpleton to think you could. Look at yourself in a mirror and tell me frankly if you think you are of an age or appearance that would make it wise to intrust young ladies to your charge—"

Here Mascarot stopped, as if he feared to trust his memory, and proceeded to consult his notes. "Let us continue," he said at last. "Your departure from Poitiers was your crowning folly. The very day after your mother's death, you gathered together all you possessed—some three thousand francs or so—and took a railway ticket for Paris."

"At that time, sir, I hoped—"

"What? To arrive at Fortune by the road to Glory? Madman! Why, each year a thousand poor devils, who have been intoxicated by the praise of their native villages, reach Paris intoxicated by similar hopes. Do you know what becomes of them? At the end of ten years, ten at the most have

made their way, five hundred have died of hunger and disappointment—and the rest are enrolled in the vast army of criminals and reprobates." Paul had said all this to himself over and over again, and admitting its truth could urge nothing in reply. "But," continued Mascarot, "you did not come alone. At Poitiers you had fallen in love with a young work girl, named Rose Pigoreau, and you thought it wise to run away with her—"

"Ah! sir, if you would only allow me to explain—"

"It would be quite useless, I assure you. The result speaks for itself! In six months your three thousand francs were exhausted. Then came distress and hunger; and at last, stranded at the Hôtel du Pérou, you were thinking of suicide, when you were saved by old Tantaine."

These cruel truths were hard to bear, and Paul half felt inclined to show his anger; but then, good-bye to the protection of the powerful agent, and so, on second thoughts, he controlled himself. "I admit it, sir," he said, somewhat bitterly. "I was a fool, and half crazy, but misfortune has taught me wisdom. I am here, and this fact should convince you that I have renounced all my wills o' the wisp."

"Then you also renounce Rose Pigoreau?"

At this cutting question Paul turned pale with anger. "I love Rose," he observed, curtly; "I think I told you so. She has faith in me, and courageously shares my ill fortune. I am sure of her affection. Some day, sir, Rose will be my wife."

Mascarot raised his velvet cap, and, without the slightest shade of irony, in fact, most seriously, bowed low, saying as he did so: "I beg ten thousand pardons." However, it was plainly not his intention to insist on this point. "You wish employment," he resumed, "and at once. What is your speciality? You have none, no doubt. Like all college educated young fellows, you can do a little of everything, and nothing thoroughly. If I had a son, and an income of millions, he should still learn a trade."

Paul bit his lips, recognizing only too well the justice of B. Mascarot's remarks. Had he not, only the evening before, envied the lot of those who earned their bread by the sweat of their brows?

"And yet," continued Mascarot, "I must come to your assistance. You are my friend, and I don't leave friends in the lurch. Come, what should you say to a situation with a salary of twelve thousand francs a year?"

This sum was so much in excess of Paul's most sanguine hopes that he fancied the agent was poking fun at him. "It is not very generous on your part, sir, to laugh at me," said he.

Mascarot was not in jest, however; and yet it required a full half hour to convince his young client that he was entirely in earnest. Perhaps, after all, this result would not have been attained had he not suddenly thought of saying: "You wish for proofs. Very well—shall I advance you your first month's salary?" with which words he proffered a thousand franc note, drawn from his strong box.

Paul pushed the note aside, but he realised the full force of this powerful argument, and asked if he were capable of fulfilling the duties of so highly remunerated an office.

"Should I make the proposal," answered Mascarot, "were I not certain of your abilities? Just now I am terribly hurried, or I would explain to you the whole matter; as it is, I must defer doing so until to-morrow. So be here at the same time as you came to-day."

Bewildered as Paul was, he understood that it would be an intrusion on his part to remain any longer, so he rose to take his leave.

"One moment," exclaimed Mascarot. "You cannot, of course, remain any longer at the Hotel du Pérou. Find yourself a decent room in this neighbourhood, and let me know your new address. Now, good-bye until to-morrow, take care of yourself, and learn to bear prosperity."

For a minute Mascarot stood at his office door listening attentively to Paul's retreating steps. Heavy indeed was the young man's footfall—in fact, as Mascarot divined he was staggering beneath the weight of his conflicting feelings. As soon as the agent was sure that he had left the house, he hurried to a glass door at the rear of his private room, opened it and called: "Here! Hortebize! Doctor! You can come now. He has gone."

A well dressed man immediately made his appearance, and hastily drew a chair to the fire. "Brou! my feet are blocks of ice!" he exclaimed. "If any one cut them off, I doubt if I should know it. Your bed-room, Baptistin, is a refrigerator. Another time, please let me have a fire."

But Mascarot was not to be diverted from his train of thought. "Did you hear?" he asked.

"I heard everything and saw everything as well as you did."

"Then what do you think of this youth?"

"I think that Taintine is a man of sense, and that in your hands this handsome fellow will be like wax."

III.

DR. HORTEBIZE, the intimate of "the agency," who thus familiarly called Mascarot by his Christian name of Baptistin, was fully fifty-six years of age; but he only admitted forty-nine, and was wise in doing so, for he carried their weight so lightly that people even supposed him younger still. He bore himself with a jaunty air, his thick sensual lips were still ruddy, his hair black, and his eyes full of fire. A man of the world, received in the best society, elegant in his manners, keen in his wit, he concealed under a certain light sarcasm of speech the most monstrous cynicism—in fact, if he had but few faults, he could count several appalling vices. He was much liked and much courted. His epicurean manner did not prevent him, it was said, from being in reality a true savant and distinguished physician. Still he was far from being a hard worker, and practiced as little as possible. Some few years previously, with the view, so he declared, of getting rid of his patients who pestered him, he had actually espoused homeopathic doctrines, and had started a medical journal called the *Globule*, which came to an end after the fifth number. His conversion made every one laugh, he, however, laughing the loudest, and this, of course, proved the sincerity of the philosophy he professed. However, Dr. Hortebize never wished, nor was able, to take anything seriously, and Mascarot, well as he knew his friend, seemed annoyed and wounded by his jesting tone.

"If I wrote to you to come here this morning," he said, reproachfully, "if I asked you to conceal yourself in that room—"

"Where I froze!" interrupted Hortebize.

"It was," continued Mascarot, "because I wished for your advice. We have started on a terrible enterprise, Hortebize; an enterprise full of peril to you as well as to myself."

"Pshaw! As you very well know, I have blind confidence in you.

Whatever you do is well done. You are not the man to venture on such a game without a fair supply of trumps."

"That's true; but I may lose, and then—"

The doctor interrupted his friend by gaily shaking a large gold locket which hung from his watch chain. This gesture seemed peculiarly disagreeable to Mascarot.

"Why do you show me that gew-gaw?" he asked, angrily. "I have known it for the last five-and-twenty years! Do you wish to tell me that it contains poison for personal use in case of misfortune? All right, the precaution is praiseworthy; but it would be wiser to make it unnecessary by giving me your attention and advice at an earlier stage of the game."

The smiling physician threw himself back in his chair with a resigned expression. "If you desire a consultation," he said, "you had better have sent for our honourable friend Catenac; he knows something of business, as he is an advocate."

This name of Catenac so irritated Mascarot that, calmest and most gentle of men as he usually was, he tore off his velvet cap and tossed it in a rage on to his writing table. "Do you say that seriously?" he asked in an angry voice.

"Why not?"

Mascarot took off his spectacles, as if without them he could more easily read the doctor's innermost thoughts. "Because," he said, slowly, "because you, as well as I, distrust Catenac. How long is it since you saw him? Certainly more than three months."

"Very true; and I admit that he conducts himself singularly enough towards his old partners and comrades."

Mascarot smiled in a way that would probably have alarmed the unfortunate Catenac, had he been present. "You will admit, then, that his conduct is utterly without excuse, for we have made his fortune. He is rich—very rich—although he pretends the contrary."

"Do you really think so?"

"If he were here, I would make him confess that he is worth over a million."

"A million!" repeated the physician, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"Yes, at the very least. You and I, Hortebize, have gratified all our fancies, let gold slip through our fingers like grains of sand, while he, our friend, has hoarded up his guins."

"What would you have? He has neither tastes, nor passions, nor even a digestion. Poor Catenac!"

"He! He has every vice, the hypocrite! While we amused ourselves, he lent money at heavy interest, twenty and five-and-twenty per cent, and—stay—what is your annual outlay?"

"My annual outlay? Your question embarrasses me. Forty thousand francs, perhaps."

"More, much more; but no matter. Calculate how much that would amount to during the twenty years we have been connected together."

The doctor was no lover of arithmetic; he made several futile attempts to arrive at the total, and finally gave up the task in despair.

"Come," said Mascarot; "call it eight hundred thousand francs; add the same amount on my account, and you will see that we have spent between us more than a million and a half."

"Why, it's frightful!"

"To be sure, frightful. So you can easily see that Catenac, who

ceived as much as ourselves, has grown wealthy. And this is the principal reason of my distrust—our interests are no longer the same. He comes here every month, but only to draw his third. He condescends to accept the profits of our enterprise, but avoids the risks. It is two years since he brought us any business. There is no reliance to be placed in him whatever. No matter what we propose to him, he declines to act. He sees risks and danger in everything."

"But he is incapable of betraying us."

Mascarot did not reply at once; he was reflecting. "I think," he answered, finally, "that Catenac is afraid of us. He knows that the fall of one of the three would necessarily bring the two others to grief. This is our only safeguard. But if he does not dare to betray us openly he is quite capable of working against us. Our partnership worries him. Do you know what he said to me the last time he was here? He said we ought to shut up shop and retire. Retire! Ah, well, how should we two live then? For, if he is rich we are poor. What are you worth, Hortebize?"

The doctor, the brilliant physician, who was believed to be a millionaire, had taken out his purse and was counting its contents. "I have precisely three hundred and twenty-seven francs," he answered with a laugh. "And how do you stand?"

Mascarot made a wry face. "I," he replied "am as bad off as you are;" and with a sigh he continued, half-speaking to himself—"Besides I have sacred obligations, whereas you have only yourself to think of."

For the first time since the beginning of the interview Dr. Hortebize looked worried. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I depended on you for a thousand crowns, which I pressingly need."

The physician's uneasiness caused a quiet smile to flicker over Mascarot's face. "Be easy," he said, "I can accommodate you with that. There are still some six or eight thousand francs in the safe."

The doctor breathed more freely.

"But that is all," continued Mascarot. "It is the end of our common funds—of the money belonging to us collectively. And this, too, after twenty years labour, peril, and suspense."

"And there are not twenty years more before us."

"Precisely," returned Mascarot, "we are growing old. So all the more reason for making one grand stroke to assure our future. If I were to fall ill to-morrow, it would be all UP."

"That is quite true," said the doctor with a shudder.

"One thing is certain—that we must speedily make a grand coup. I have said this for years and years, and now it must be done. I have long been preparing a net which ought to bring us a rich haul. And now, perhaps, you understand why in this emergency I apply to you rather than to Catenac. Do you understand why I spent two hours this morning explaining to you the plan of a couple of operations I have in view?"

"If one of them only should succeed, our fortune is made."

"Precisely. Now the question to decide is, whether our chances of success are great enough to warrant our going on with these enterprises. Think it over, and give me an answer."

Dr. Hortebize, in spite of his frivolous manners was an acute observer, skilful and inventive moreover in devising expedients, and at the same time a safe counsellor in moments of emergency, for never, under any circumstances, however perilous, did he lose his smiling *sans froid*. B.

Mascarot was aware of this when he insisted on having his opinion. Driven to the wall and compelled to choose, as one might say, between the contents of the medallion and the prolongation of his luxurious existence, he lost some of his gaiety, and seemed to reflect. Leaning back in his arm-chair, with his feet on the fender, he analyzed the various combinations which had been laid before him, as carefully as a general might have studied the plan of a battle on which the fate of an empire depended. His analysis was favourable to the projected enterprises : for Mascarot, who was attentively watching him, at last saw a smile steal over his thick lips.

After a prolonged pause the doctor at last spoke. "We must make an attack," he said. "Do not let us deceive ourselves. Your projects are excessively dangerous, and a mistake would ruin us. At the same time, we may find ourselves in a most unpleasant position if we wait for an affair that is perfectly safe. Here we have twenty chances against us, but we have eighty in our favour. Under these circumstances, and, above all, as necessity knows no law, I can only say, go ahead!" He rose to his feet as he spoke these words, and offered his hand to his honourable friend, saying: "I am your man!"

This decision delighted Mascarot. He was in that state of mind, when no matter how strong and self-reliant a man may generally be, he is in momentary doubt of himself, and when the approbation of a competent friend is of immense value. It is the weight that turns the trembling scale. "You have weighed everything," insisted the agent; "examined everything? You know that of these two matters, only one is ripe, that of the Marquis de Croisenois—"

"Yes, yes; I know."

"As to the other, that of the Duc de Champdouce, I have still to gather together various elements, which are indispensable to insure success. The duke and the duchess have a secret, of this there is no doubt; but what is this secret? Is it what I suspect? I would wager anything that I am right; but more than suspicions are necessary—more than probabilities—we must have, of course, absolute certainties to depend upon."

"No matter," exclaimed the doctor, "I maintain what I have said."

He thought, perhaps, that there was an end to the matter for the time, but he was mistaken. "Now," continued Mascarot, "this brings us back to my previous question. What do you think of this youth, this Paul Violaine?"

Hortebize took several turns up and down the room, and finally stationed himself opposite his friend with his elbow on the chimney-piece. This was his favourite position when, in a salon, after being duly urged, he related one of those somewhat questionable anecdotes, his specialities—which are only acceptable on account of the witty manner in which they are related. "I think," he answered, "that this youth has many of the qualities we desire, and that it is doubtful if we could find a better person. Besides, he is a natural son, and knows nothing of his father, which leaves a door wide open for suppositions; for every bastard has the right, if he chooses, to believe himself the son of a king. In the second place, he has neither family nor any known protectors, which assures us that, come what will, we shall have no account to render to any one. Besides he is poor. He has no great amount of sense, but is possessed of a certain brilliant varnish and of any amount of egregious vanity. Finally, he is a wonderfully handsome fellow, which, in itself, will smooth away many difficulties; only—"

"Ah! there is an 'only,' then?"

The doctor repressed a smile. "More than one" he replied, "for there are three, at least. First, this young woman, this Rose Pigoreau, whose beauty has so enraptured our worthy friend Tantine, seems to me destined to become a great danger in the future."

Mascarot waved his hand significantly.

"Be easy," he said, "we will easily rid Paul of that young woman."

"Very good. But do not deceive yourself," insisted the doctor, in a more serious tone than was habitual to him. "The danger from her is not what you think, and what you seek to avoid. You are convinced that the young fellow loves the girl; you are mistaken. He would leave her to-morrow for the smallest gratification of his self-love."

"Perhaps so."

"She, however, thinks she hates her lover, but she deceives herself. She is simply wearied of poverty. Give her a month's repose and luxury, with gratified whims and good living, and you will see her turn from every one else for the sake of her Paul. Yes, you will see her pursue, harass and annoy him as women of her class, who have nothing to lose, pursue and annoy their old lovers—she will even follow him into Flavia's presence, and claim him back."

"She had best not!" said the gentle agent, in a threatening tone.

"Why, what could you do? How could you prevent her from speaking? She has known Paul since her infancy, she knew his mother—she was perhaps brought up by her, perhaps lived in the same street. Remember my words, and look out for danger in this direction."

"You are possibly right, and I will take my measures accordingly." It sufficed, in fact, for Mascarot only to know of a danger to guard against it.

"My second 'only,'" continued the physician, "is prompted by that mysterious protector whom the young man has spoken of. His father, he declares is dead; his mother swore it to him. Well, I accept that statement as a fact. But in that case, what has become of the unknown individual who paid the annuity to Madame Violaine? An immediate sacrifice of however large an amount, I could understand; but such unflagging devotion puzzles me, I confess."

"You are right, quite right, my friend. These are the defects in our armour. But I am on the look-out, doctor, and will spare no efforts."

The physician was growing very weary of the discussion, but still he went bravely on: "My third objection," he said "is perhaps stronger still. It is necessary for us to utilise this young man at once, to-morrow, even, without having had time to teach him his part, without having prepared him. If, by chance, he should happen to be honest! Suppose he met your dazzling proposals with a decided 'no?'"

In his turn Mascarot now rose. "This supposition," said he, breezily, "has no weight at all."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because, doctor, when Tantine brought this youth to us he had studied him thoroughly. He is weaker than a woman, with more vanity than the penny-a-liner round the corner. He is, besides, ashamed of his poverty. No, no; in my hands he will be like wax, that I can mould into any form I choose. Whatever we intend him to be, he will become."

Hortebizo did not choose to argue the matter. "Are you sure," he quietly asked, "that Mademoiselle Flavia counts for nothing in your choice?"

"On this point," replied Mascarot, "excuse me, if I don't expla-

myself—" He paused abruptly and listened: "I fancied I heard some-one knocking," he said at last. "Hark!"

Yes, there was a knock at the door; and the doctor, rising to his feet, prepared to regain his hiding-place. But Mascarot detained him. "It is only Beaumarchef," he said, and he touched a gilt bell on his desk. The next moment indeed, Beaumarchef, entered the room. With an air of mingled respect and familiarity, he saluted the doctor and the agent in a military fashion, his hand to his forehead and his elbow raised to the height of his eyes.

"Ah?" said the doctor, gaily, "so you still take your little drops of brandy neat?"

"Only a few, sir, very few," he answered modestly.

"Too many, Beaumar, much too many. Do you think I can't see; your inflamed complexion, your nose, and your eyelids all tell the story."

"And yet, sir, I assure you—"

"You know what I said to you, that you were threatened with asthma. Note the movements of your pectoral muscles—your lungs are obstructed."

"That is because I have been running, sir."

This conversation was not to the taste of Mascarot, and so he hastened to interrupt it. "If he is out of breath," he said, "it is because he has tried to repair a very great piece of carelessness on his part. Well, how did you succeed, Beaumar?"

"We have got her, sir," he answered triumphantly.

"That's capital," responded Mascarot.

"What are you talking about?" asked the doctor.

With a finger on his lips, Mascarot gave his friend a warning glance, and then, in an off-hand tone that was by no means habitual, he answered: "Beaumar has been after a woman named Caroline Schimmel, an old servant of the Champdoce family, who has a little matter of business with me. Go on, Beaumar—so you have found her?"

"Yes, thanks to an idea that came to me."

"Pshaw? Are you going to have ideas at this time of life?"

Beaumarchef looked vastly important. "It was like this," he continued. "On going out with Toto-Chupin, I said to myself—the woman went up the street to be sure, but, knowing her habits, it is quite impossible she went as far as the Boulevard without entering a wine-shop."

"Well reasoned," nodded the doctor approvingly.

"In consequence, Toto and I, just looked into every shop we passed; and true enough, as we reached the Rue du Petit Carreau, we found Caroline in a tobacconist's shop where liquors are sold."

"And Toto is looking after her now?"

"He swore to me, sir, that he would walk in her shadow until you said 'enough!' And, besides, he promised to let you have a report every day."

Mascarot rubbed his hands. "I am pleased with you, Beaumar," he said, "very much pleased indeed."

The compliment appeared to delight the assistant-partner, who wiped his brow, but did not withdraw. "That's not everything, sir," he resumed.

"What else, then?"

"Downstairs, I met La Candèle, on his way back from the Place du Petit Pont, and he had just seen—"

"Ah, indeed! What had he seen?"

"That young woman, sir, driving away in a brougham with two horses. Of course he followed, and she is now installed in the Rue de Douai, in a

most gorgeous apartment, so the door-keeper of the house says. And it seems, sir, that the girl is a great beauty. *La Candèle* went on like a madman about her. He says that her eyes are extraordinary."

The doctor looked up quickly. "Our friend *Tantaine* was correct in his description, then?"

Mascarot frowned austere. "Perfectly so," he answered, "and this proves, *Hortebize*, the justice of the objection you made a short time ago. Such a conspicuously beautiful girl is a danger, and the fool who has carried her off may himself even become a nuisance, under her influence."

Beaumarchef here ventured to touch Mascarot's arm; he had got another idea. "If you wish to get rid of that dandy," he said, "I can tell you how."

"How, pray?"

Instead of answering, the ex-noncommissioned officer fell into the attitude of a fencing-master. "One, two—parry—thrust—parry—no other thrust and all over."

"A Prussian quarrel," murmured Mascarot. "A duel! That would not do us any good. The girl would still be on our hands; and violent measures are always more or less compromising." He reflected for a moment, and then, taking off his spectacles and wiping them slowly, he looked intently at the doctor. "Suppose," said he, "suppose we pressed some epidemic into our service. What do you say, doctor, to this girl having the small-pox? Then her beauty would be gone."

The physician looked pensive. "Under certain circumstances," he answered, "we might call disease to our aid; but even if *Rose* were disfigured she would still be dangerous. It is her love for *Paul* that we have to fear, not his for her, and with a woman, fidelity is always in proportion to her ugliness."

"That is a point for discussion," rejoined Mascarot. "In the meanwhile, we must protect ourselves from present danger. A short time ago, *Beaumarchef*, I told you to draw up a statement of this *Gandelu's* affairs. What is his situation?"

"He is overwhelmed with debts, sir, but his creditors do not press because of his prospective fortune—"

"You are a fool, *Beaumar*," interrupted Mascarot. "A fellow like *Gandelu*, head over heels in debt and head over heels in love, can surely be trapped somehow or other. Among those creditors of his, there must certainly be two or three of our set, ready to act as I desire. Obtain information on that point, and report it to me this evening—and now leave us."

Once alone, the two friends remained for some time absorbed in silent reflection. The moment was a decisive one. They were still uncommitted to any course of action, but, if once they put their hands to the plough, they must go forward without hope of retracing their steps. Now, although their natures were strong enough to enable them to look the matter straight in the face and decide accordingly, the doctor's sempiternal smile faded gradually away, as he pursued his train of thought, and it was with a feverish hand that he rattled his medallion. Was he hesitating? Perhaps so. However, Mascarot, at all events, was determined. "Let us deliberate no longer," he said. "We will close our eyes and march on. You heard the promises made by the *Marquis de Croisenois*. He gave us our task, but with certain conditions. He must marry *Mademoiselle de Mussidan*."

"I doubt whether he will."

"He must, I say, since we wish it, and it shall be so. In p...

before a couple of hours are over, the projected marriage between Mademoiselle Sabine and the Baron de Breuille-Paverlay will be broken off."

The doctor sighed. "I understand Catenac's scruples," he murmured. "Ah! if I only had a million like him."

During these last few minutes Mascaret, going to and fro from his sleeping-room to his private office, rapidly changed his clothes. "Are you ready?" he asked Hortebizo.

"Yes, since there is no retreating."

"Then let us be off." And opening the door the agent called out, "Beaumar, send for a cab."

IV.

If there is one quarter of Paris more highly favoured than others it is surely that which lies between the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré on one side, and the Seine on the other, which commences at the Place de la Concorde, and ends at the Avenue de l'Impératrice. In this delightful district of the great city millionaires grow and blossom spontaneously like rhododendrons at certain altitudes. There stand their superb mansions with spacious gardens, where the lawns are always green, the flowers always blooming, and the tall trees always tenanted by carolling birds. Among all these magnificent mansions, none surely are more desirable than the Hôtel de Mussidan, the last work of poor Sévair, the architect, who died just as the world was beginning to recognize his merit.

Standing between a wide gravelled courtyard and a shady garden, the Hôtel de Mussidan offers an aspect of mingled grandeur and elegance. There is but little carving around the windows and along the cornices, no encausted or tessellated colour-work on the façade, but the proportions are admirable and each line is calculated to impart effect. A broad flight of steps in white marble, with a double balustrade and sheltered by a lightly built marquise in bronze, leads to the grand entrance. Of a morning, at seven o'clock or so, the wayfarer who glances through the open iron work of the gateway fronting the street—the Rue de Matignon—will see the servants passing to and fro in the courtyard, where everything shows that this is the abode of a noble and wealthy family. There stands the ceremonial barouche, waiting to be washed, or the count's phaeton, or the quiet brougham which the countess uses when she goes out shopping. And that superb chestnut thoroughbred, so sleek and glossy, which a groom is carefully saddling, is Mirette, the favourite, often mounted by Mademoiselle Sabine, of a morning before breakfast.

It was a short distance off, at the corner of the Avenue Matignon, that Mascaret and his worthy friend stopped their cab, and paying the driver dismissed him. As they walked up the street, Mascaret, with his black clothes, his white cravat, and his blue spectacles, might readily have been taken for some grave magistrate. As for the physician, although a little paler than usual, he was as smiling as ever. "Now," said Mascaret, "let us make our last arrangements. The count and countess consider you a friend."

"By no means. A mere physician, whose ancestors were not among the crusaders, could hardly aspire to the friendship of the Mussidans."

"But the countess knows you. She will not refuse to hear you, nor call for help when you open your lips. By entrenching yourself behind some

nameless rascal you can even save your own reputation. I, in my turn, will interview the count."

"Be careful," said the doctor, thoughtfully. "The count is frightfully violent. He is a man who, at the first word he doesn't like, would not hesitate to pitch you out of the window."

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "I can bring him to terms," he said, disdainfully.

"Be on your guard, nevertheless."

The two friends were now passing the Hôtel de Mussidan, and the physician having briefly explained its internal arrangements, they continued to walk on.

"I will manage the husband," said Mascarot, "and you will take care of the wife. I shall insist on the count withdrawing his word from M. de Breulh-Favorlay, but I shall not mention the name of the Marquis de Croisenois. You, on the contrary, must come out with the Croisenois side of the affair, and scarcely speak of M. de Breulh."

"Be easy, my lesson is learned; I shall not forget it."

"The beautiful part of the business, my dear doctor, is that the husband will be very anxious as to his wife's opinion; while she, on her side, will wonder what her husband may say. When they meet after we have left them, the first who suggests breaking off the marriage with M. de Breulh will be astonished to find the other quite agreeable."

This idea so tickled the doctor's fancy that he laughed aloud. "And as we approach them from such different directions," he said, "they will never suspect any complicity between us. Decidedly, friend Baptistin, you are more ingenious than I supposed."

"Wait awhile, and compliment me when the battle's won."

As they reached the Faubourg Saint Honoré, Mascarot espied a café and walked towards it. "Go in there and wait for me, doctor, while I make a certain call you know of. I will call for you on my return. If the answer I bring be 'yes,' I will go at once to see the count, and twenty minutes later you must call on the countess."

The clocks were striking four, when these honourable partners shook hands and separated. Dr. Hortebize entered the suggested café while B. Mascarot followed the Faubourg St. Honoré beyond the Rue du Colysée, when sighting a wine shop he opened the door and walked in. The landlord of this well-known, we might almost say celebrated, establishment, had not considered it necessary to have his name painted above his door, but throughout the neighbourhood he was known as Father Canon. The wine he served to passers-by and chance customers over the metal counter was, as he himself honestly admitted, about as bad as it could be; but then he held in reserve for his usual patrons—the coachmen and footmen of the neighbourhood—a special vintage from the vicinity of Mâcon, which in addition to other qualities had that of rising rapidly to the head, so that more than one servant, having too freely imbibed of it, had received warning from his master or mistress.

On seeing so well-dressed, and especially so solemn a looking gentleman as B. Mascarot enter his shop, Father Canon condescended to come forward and take his order in person. In France, the land of smiles, a grave countenance is the best of passports. "What do you wish, sir?" asked the wine vendor, with immense suavity.

"I should like," answered Mascarot, "to speak to a man named Florestan."

"In the service of the Comte de Mussidan, I believe?"

"Precisely. He made an appointment with me here—" "He is below in the music-room," said Father Canon. "I will send for him."

"Oh! do not trouble yourself—I will go down myself;" and without waiting for a rejoinder, Mascarot went toward a staircase leading to the cellars.

"It seems to me," muttered Father Canon, "that I have seen this lawyer before."

The stairs were sufficiently wide, not over steep, and in default of light there was at least a hand rail. Mascarot descended a score of steps, and reaching a door, thickly padded on either side, hastily pushed it open. At once—like gas streaming through a crack—strange, fantastic sounds darted up the stairs into the shop above; but Mascarot was neither terrified nor astonished. He descended three more steps, pushed open another door, padded like the first one, and reached the threshold of a large vaulted room, arranged as a café, and lighted by gas, with tables and chairs all round, and numerous Jeanmuses gaily imbibing the noted Mâcon wine.

In the centre of the room, two men in their shirt sleeves and with puffed-out crimson faces, were blowing on huge hunting-horns of the approved Dampierre pattern, while near them an old fellow, wearing long leather gaiters buttoning above the knee, a scarlet vest and a broad undressed leather belt secured by a buckle bearing a coat-of-arms, was whistling an air, which the horn-blowers tried to imitate. But a general hush ensued as the agent hat in hand bowed round the room.

"Ah! it's Papa Mascarot," exclaimed a superbly whiskered young fellow, in velvet breeches and white stockings and pumps. "Welcome; I expected you, and a clean glass is here in readiness."

Mascarot, without waiting to be urged, took a seat at the table and poured out a glass of wine, which he drank with evident satisfaction.

"Was it Father Canon," resumed this young man, who was the Florestan the agent had asked after, "that told you I was here? It is a very good place to be in; don't you think so?"

"I do indeed."

"The police, as you know, don't allow horns to be blown in Paris; so Papa Canon has just settled us in this cellar, where we can blow away as much as we like. We can't be heard outside, for the doors are padded and there are no windows; but we receive a supply of air from the two pipes you can see there above."

The two musical students having resumed their lesson, Florestan was obliged to carry his two hands to his mouth to serve as a kind of speaking trumpet, and shout with the full force of his lungs. "That old man," said he, "is an old huntsman in the Duc de Champdouce's service. He has not his equal with a horn. I have taken only twenty lessons of him, and I can already do wonders. Would you like me to sound you a 'stag found,' a 'full cry,' a 'change of scent,' a 'hallali,' or—"

"Thanks," cried Mascarot, seeking to hide his terror. "Some day, when I have more time, I shall be delighted to hear you exhibit your acquirements; but to-day I am somewhat hurried, and besides, I am anxious to have a few words in private with you."

"I'm agreeable; but I fancy that you would prefer another place for our conversation. Let us go up-stairs and ask for a private room."

Father Canon's private rooms were not very luxurious, nor were they particularly secluded, being merely separated one from another by thin

partitions fitted with windows of dull glass. Still they were usually discreet as regards the conversation they heard, providing the speakers moderated their tone; and this was, after all, the important point. "Ah, if these walls could talk, what strange stories they would have to tell!" Thus spoke Florestan as he sat down opposite Mascarot, at a small table, whereon Father Canon speedily placed a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"I dare say," said Mascarot; "but I care little for scandal. I asked you to meet me here, Florestan, as you are in a position to do me a small favour."

"Anything in my power," answered the young man.

"Now, then, we will begin by a few words about yourself. How do you get on with your Count de Mussidan?"

A startling familiarity of speech and address was one of Mascarot's characteristics. This revolted many of his clients, but Florestan was not of the number. "I am not pleased with my situation there," he answered, "and in fact I've already asked Beaumarchef to find me something else."

"I can't understand that. All your predecessors in the count's service say that it is perfectly satisfactory."

"Try it yourself, then," interrupted the valet. "In the first place, he is awfully stingy."

Mascarot made a gesture implying what contempt he entertained for such a failing.

"Then," continued Florestan, "he is as suspicious as a cat. He never leaves anything about, not a letter, not a cigar, nor a louis. He spends half his time unlocking the cupboards and drawers, and locking them up again, and actually sleeps with his keys under his pillow."

"I admit that such distrust is very galling."

"Indeed it is: and, in addition, he is frightfully violent. His eyes flash for nothing, and he looks as if he was going to kill you or knock you down twenty times in the day. To tell you the truth, he frightens me."

This sketch, coming after Hortebize's warning seemed to render Mascarot thoughtful. "Is the count always like this, or only occasionally?" he asked.

"He is always bad enough, but when he has been drinking or gambling, he is ever so much worse. He never comes home till four in the morning—even when he comes home at all."

"And what does the countess say to that."

Florestan laughed and looked at Mascarot as if he half thought him a simpleton. "Madame? She doesn't trouble herself much about her lord and master, I can tell you. Sometimes they don't see each other for weeks. all she cares for is to have plenty of money to spend. You should just see the creditors swarming round the house."

"But the Mussidans are very rich."

"Enormously rich; but nevertheless there are times when there isn't a franc in the house. Then madame is like a tigress. She sends round to her friends to borrow, no matter what—a hundred fances, fifty, even ten, and at times she is actually refused."

"But that's very humiliating."

"Not to her. But when really a large sum is required, madame sends to the Duc de Champdoce, and he never says no. And yet she doesn't waste words on him."

Mascarot smiled. "One would think," he said, "that you knew what the countess writes when—"

"To be sure! I like to know what errands I'm sent on. Well, she simply writes to him, 'My friend, I need so much,' and he sends it her without flinching. Of course it's easy to see that there is, or has been, something between them."

"I should certainly think so."

"Of course; besides, when my master and mistress do meet, it is only to quarrel. And such quarrels! In a mechanic's home, when the husband has drank too much, he thrashes his wife, who screams and cries. But that's nothing. They go to bed, kiss and make up, and it's all over. But these people say things to each other in cold blood that neither can ever forgive."

Mascarot listened to these particulars with such an absent air that one might have believed him previously aware of them. "Then," said he, "there is only Mademoiselle Sabino who is a pleasant person to serve."

"Oh, she is always kind and civil."

"So you think her fiancé, M. de Breulh-Faverlay, will be a happy man?"

"Happy enough, I suppose; but that marriage will perhaps—" Florestan paused as if seized by a sudden scruple. He looked round the room as if to make sure that no one could overhear him, and then in a low voice, and in a most mysterious manner, continued, "Mademoiselle Sabine has been so left to herself, that she is as free as if she were a young man. Do you understand?"

Mascarot became very attentive. "Do you mean," he asked, "that the young lady has a lover?"

"Precisely."

"But that's quite impossible; and allow me to say it's very wrong for you to repeat such slander."

This remark seemed to excite the valet to an extraordinary degree. "Slander!" he exclaimed. "I know what I know. If I talk of a lover it is because I've seen him with my own eyes—not once, but twice."

From the manner in which Mascarot hastily took off his spectacles, wiped and replaced them, Florestan saw that his listener was interested to the highest degree. "Tell me," said the agent, "tell me how this happened."

"Well, the first time was at church one morning, when my young lady went alone to mass. It began to rain suddenly, and Modesto, her maid, begged me run round with an umbrella. So off I started; and on entering the church what did I see? Why, Mademoiselle herself standing near the *benitier*, and talking with a young man. Naturally, I slipped behind a pillar and watched."

"But this is not what you call a certainty, is it?"

"Why, of course it is; and that's how you would call it, had you seen the way the two looked at each other."

"What sort of person was the young man?"

"Handsome, about my height, and well built, with a distinguished air."

"And what about the second time?"

"Ah! that's a long story. However, one day I was told to accompany mademoiselle, who was going to visit a friend living in the Rue Marbeuf. Very good; but at the corner of the Champs Elysées mademoiselle motioned me to approach, and then said, 'Florestan, I forgot to post this letter; run as quick as you can to the post-office. I will wait here for you.' So saying she handed me a note."

"And you read it?"

"No, indeed! I said to myself: There is something going on here. She wants to get rid of me, so I had better remain. That decided, instead of posting the letter, I hid behind a tree and waited. Scarcely was I out of sight than I saw the fellow whom I had seen in the church come quickly round the corner. I had some difficulty in recognising him, for he was now dressed like a common workman, in a white blouse soiled with plaster. They talked together for ten minutes or so, and mademoiselle gave him something that looked to me like a photograph. And now what do you say of my certainties?"

As he finished, Florestan noticed that the bottle of wine was empty, and he was about to call for another when Mascarat intervened. "No, no," he said, "it is growing very late, and is time I should say what I wish you to do for me. The count is at home at this hour, I suppose?"

"I should rather think he was! He slipped on the stairs a couple of days ago, and has not gone out since."

"Well, my lad, it's absolutely necessary I should speak to your master. If I sent up my card he would no doubt refuse to receive me, and so I rely on you to introduce me into his presence."

For a moment Florestan made no answer. "That's a tough task, let me tell you," he said at last. "The count doesn't like unexpected visitors. However, as I don't mean to stay with him, and as it's for you—well—yes—I'll risk it."

Mascarat had already risen. "We must not reach the house together," he said. "Go on first. I will settle here, and follow you in five minutes' time. Remember, you must look as if you had never seen me before."

"Don't be anxious, but remember you have to find me a good place!"

As agreed, the honest and punctilious Mascarat settled the score due to Father Canon, and then called at the café to acquaint Dr. Hortebize with the result of his errand. A few moments later Florestan, in his most respectful voice, announced to his master,

"Monsieur Mascarat."

V.

It is certain that "B. Mascarat, Director of the Employment Agency of the Rue Montorgueil," to use his own descriptive phraseology, was gifted with a prodigious amount of impudence. He had, mentally, so often travelled over the unexplored field of probabilities and possibilities, that nothing could surprise him, or take him unawares. He was always on the watch, always prepared; as ready for defence as for attack. He often compared himself to those skilful circus riders, who, after mastering animals, specially trained to throw whomsoever bestride them, can tackle the most vicious steeds with success. And this comparison was not exaggerated. Mascarat was a man of great dexterity and nerve.

Still, as he mounted the magnificent staircase of the Mussidan mansion, illuminated with superb lamps, for it was now dusk, the agent—he admitted it himself to Dr. Hortebize a few hours later—felt his legs quake and his heart beat with extraordinary vehemence. He turned his tongue in his mouth seeking for absent saliva to moisten his parched lips, as, duly preceded by Florestan, he crossed an ante-room, furnished with velvet couches, and at last reached the threshold of the library—a vast apartment, decorated with a certain severity of taste

On hearing this plebeian name of Mascarot, which sounded as much out of place as a drunkard's oath in the room of some pure young maiden, M. de Mussidan quickly raised his head. He was seated at the further end of the room, reading by the light of several wax tapers standing in candelabra of exquisite workmanship. Letting his paper fall on his knees, he settled his glasses on his nose, and looked with infinite surprise at Mascarot, who, with his hat in his hand, and his heart in his mouth, slowly came forward, babbling unintelligible apologies. This examination availed him little, and the count half rose, as he asked, "Whom do you wish to see, sir?"

"Yourself, the Comte de Mussidan," stammered Mascarot; "and I trust, sir, that you will kindly excuse me if, unknown to you—"

With an imperious gesture, the count cut these apologies short. "Wait!" said he, in a peremptory tone. This time he rose altogether, limped with evident pain to the mantelpiece, gave a tug at the bell rope hanging there, and then resumed his seat.

Mascarot stood silent in the centre of the room, asking himself if he were going to be kicked out of doors. A moment later the door re-opened, and the valet who had ushered the agent in appeared on the threshold.

"Florestan," said the count, in a calm, cold voice, "this is the first time you have shown any one in here without my orders to that effect. If this happens a second time, you will leave my service."

"I assure you, sir—"

"That suffices; I have told you what you may expect."

While the count was speaking, Mascarot studied him with all the attention that personal interest could impart. The Comte Octave de Mussidan was in no wise the man one would have imagined, judging by Florestan's description. Already in Montaigne's time, one could only put half faith in the portrait of a master drawn by one of his servants. The count, who then was barely fifty, looked fully ten years older. He was somewhat above the average height, and seemed withered rather than thin. He was almost completely bald, while his long whiskers were snowy white. The sorrows or the passions of life had printed deep wrinkles on his face, the expression of which, more suggestive of bitterness than haughtiness, showed him to be a man who, having drunk life to the dregs, was in nowise minded to replenish the cup.

As Florestan left the room, M. de Mussidan turned towards the agent, and, in the same icy tone, exclaimed, "Explain yourself, sir."

Mascarot had often been received in the most mortifying fashion, but never to such a degree as this. Wounded in his vanity, for he was vain like all who pride themselves on possessing a mysterious power, he longed to wreak vengeance on the count. "You pompous old fool!" he said to himself, "we'll see if you'll still be as proud as this by-and-bye." However, he did not allow his features to betray his feelings. His attitude was as servile and his smile as obsequious as ever. "Monsieur le Comte," he said aloud, "does not know me, and must allow me to introduce myself. Monsieur le Comte has heard my name; as for my profession, I provide servants for noble households, and at the same time, when occasion requires, I act as a general business agent."

Long practice had enabled Mascarot to speak in such honeyed tones, and affect such an air of humility, that the count was quite deceived, and had neither a suspicion nor a presentiment; he did not divine the threatening glance directed at him from behind those blue spectacles. "Ah!" he

answered with a wearied look, "you are a business agent, are you? One of my creditors has sent you to me, then, I suppose, Monsieur—"

"Mascarot, Monsieur le Comte. Mascarot."

"Mascarot, then—very well, sir—these people are absurd, as I have often told them. Why do they disturb me when I pay, without a frown, such extravagant interest? They know they are safe. They know that I am rich, and have no doubt told you so. In fact, I possess a large fortune, in landed property. If I have so far neither sold nor mortgaged—which last I consider the most ruinous thing a man can do—it is simply because I have not chosen to do so. Why the *Crédit Foncier* would advance me a million francs to-morrow merely on my property in Poitou; but I don't wish to raise money in this way."

The best proof that Mascarot had recovered his self-possession was, that instead of trying to bring the count to the point, he listened most attentively to this digression, hoping to profit by what he heard.

"You may carry back what I say," added the count, "to the people you are acting for."

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Comte; but—"

"But what?"

"I must allow myself—"

"Allow nothing—it would be useless; what I have promised I will adhere to. When it becomes necessary for me to furnish my daughter's wedding dowry, I will pay all my obligations, but not one moment before. I will simply add, however, that before long, my daughter will marry Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay. That is all."

These last words clearly signified, "You may go!" Nevertheless, Mascarot did not budge. As swiftly as a fencing master adjusts his mask, he settled his spectacles on his nose, and in an assured voice, exclaimed, "It is precisely this marriage that has brought me here."

The count could not believe he had heard aright. "What do you say?" he asked.

"I say," repeated the agent, "that I am sent to you, Monsieur le Comte, on business relating to the marriage of M. de Breulh with your daughter, Mademoiselle Sabine." ●

Neither Dr. Hortebize nor Florestan had exaggerated when speaking of the violence of the count's temper. On hearing his daughter's name thus mentioned by this unknown suspicious man of business, he turned crimson, and his eyes fairly flashed fire. "Be off!" said he sharply.

But Mascarot had no intention of doing anything of the kind. "It is a matter of great importance," he resumed.

The count became altogether exasperated on finding that the agent presumed to disobey him. "Ah! so you are determined to stay," he cried, and at the same time he hobbled once more towards the bell rope.

But Mascarot divined his intention. "Have a care!" he replied. "If you ring, you will repent it for the whole of your future life."

This threat was too much for M. de Mussidan. Abandoning the bell rope, and snatching up a cane, placed near the mantelpiece, he positively raised it as if he intended striking his visitor. But without raising an arm, or retreating an inch, the latter exclaimed in a steady voice, "No violence, count. Remember Montlouis!"

When in reply to Dr. Hortebize's warnings, Mascarot had declared he had a means of mastering the count, he was not really conscious of the full extent of his power. On hearing this name Montlouis, M. de Mussidan

became ghastly pale, and recoiled to the table, dropping the cane from his suddenly nerveless hand.

It was as if he had unexpectedly perceived some dreaded phantom. "Montlouis!" he murmured, "Montlouis!"

However, Mascarot, who after thus trying his weapons now felt sure of success, had already resumed his original humble mien. "Believe me, Monsieur le Comte," said he, "nothing but imminent danger would have decided me to mention a name which must awaken such painful recollections in your mind."

M. de Mussidan scarcely seemed to hear. He sank helplessly into his arm-chair.

"It was not I," resumed the agent, "who ever thought of using such an unfortunate—accident against you. I am merely here as an intermediate negotiator between people I despise and yourself, for whom I entertain a profound respect."

By this time, and by a great effort of energy, the count had regained his self-possession and customary air. "I really do not understand you, sir," he said, with affected carelessness. "My emotion is only too easily explained. One day, whilst hunting, I had a terrible misfortune. I accidentally killed a poor young man, my secretary, who bore the name you have mentioned. A court of law was appointed to inquire into this unhappy event, and after hearing the witnesses, decided that the young man had been the victim of his own carelessness, rather than of mine."

Mascarot's smile was so satirical, that the count paused. "The persons who have sent here," observed the agent, "are perfectly acquainted with the evidence which was produced in court. Unfortunately, they also know the real facts, which two honourable men had sworn to conceal." The count started, but Mascarot seemingly unconscious of the effect he had produced, calmly proceeded. "Your witnesses, Monsieur le Comte, did not willingly betray their oath. Providence, in its mysterious designs—"

"To the point, sir," interrupted the count, with a shudder. "To the point."

So far Mascarot had remained standing, and now seeing that there was no intention of offering him a seat, he familiarly drew up an arm-chair and installed himself in it. At this audacity the count quivered with anger, but he dared not open his lips, and this alone should have sufficed to dispel all the agent's doubts of success, supposing he had any remaining. "I am coming to it," he replied. "The event we allude to was witnessed by two persons—one of your friends, the Baron de Clinchan, and a groom of yours, named Ludovic Trofin, now in the service of the Comte de Commarin."

"I did not know what had become of Ludovic."

"I daresay, but our people know. This Ludovic, when he swore to you eternal secrecy, was a bachelor. On marrying, a few years later, he told the whole story to his young wife. This woman turned out badly, she had several lovers; and it was through one of these that the truth at last reached those who send me here."

"And it is on the word of a groom," cried the count, "and the tattle of a worthless woman that they dare accuse me!—me!"

Not one word of direct accusation had been spoken, and yet M. de Mussidan defended himself. Mascarot noticed this, and smiled as he replied, "We have other testimony besides Ludovic's."

"Ah!" rejoined the count, who felt certain of his friend's fidelity, "you do not pretend to say that the Baron de Clinchan has spoken?"

The mental disturbance of this man of the world, usually so acute and well versed in the social art of dissimulation, must have been great indeed, for he did not perceive that each word he uttered furnished his adversary with new arms against him.

"No," answered the agent, "he has done worse, he has written."

"It is false!"

Mascarot was not abashed. "The baron has written," he repeated, "but he thought he was only writing for himself. The Baron de Clinchan, as you are well aware, is the most methodical man in the world, minute and orderly in trifles to a puerile degree."

"I admit it; go on."

"Consequently, you will not be surprised to learn that from his boyhood he has kept a journal in which he notes each evening full particulars of the day's events, even to the variations of the temperature and of his health."

The count was fully aware of this peculiarity, for which his friend had often been chafed in their earlier days, and now he began to see his peril.

"On becoming acquainted with Ludovic's revelations," continued Mascarot, "my employers decided that if the story was true, mention would surely be found of it in the baron's diary. Thanks to the ingenuity and courage of certain parties, they obtained for four-and-twenty hours possession of the volume recording the baron's life in 1842."

"Infamous!" murmured the count.

"They searched, and found not only one, but three distinct statements bearing on the event in question."

M. de Mussidan started to his feet with so threatening an aspect, that the worthy Mascarot pushed back his chair in terror. "Proofs!" exclaimed the count. "Proofs!"

"Nothing has been forgotten. Before returning the volume to its place, the three leaves concerning this event were torn out—"

"Where are these pages?"

Mascarot immediately assumed an indignant air of insulted honesty. "I have not seen them," said he, "but they were photographed, and a set of proofs was intrusted to me, so that you might examine the writing."

At the same time he produced three proofs, admirably executed and wonderfully clear. The count looked at them for a long time with careful attention, and at last in a tone of utter discouragement, remarked, "Yes, that is Clinchan's handwriting."

Not a muscle in Mascarot's face indicated the pleasure with which he heard these words. "Before going on with the matter," he said, quietly, "I consider it indispensable to master the Baron de Clinchan's narrative. Do you wish to read this to yourself, Monsieur le Comte, or shall I read it aloud?"

"Read," answered the count, adding in a lower voice, "I cannot see."

Mascarot thereupon drew his own chair nearer the light. "I should judge," said he, "that this entry was made the night of the accident. This is it: '1842, Oct. 26th. Early this morning I went out shooting with Octave de Mussidan. We were accompanied by Ludovic, the keeper, and by a young fellow named Montlouis, whom Octave has been training to act some day as his estate agent. The day opened gloriously. At noon I had bagged three hares and four brace of partridges. Octave was in the best of spirits. About one o'clock we made for the woods near Bivron. I was about fifty steps in front of the others, with Ludovic, when hearing some shouting we looked round. Octave and Montlouis were having a

violent dispute, and we saw the count strike his future agent. I started to run to them, when Montlouis came to meet me. "What is the matter?" I asked, but instead of answering me, the foolish fellow turned again towards his employer, threatening him and calling him by a name which, applied to a young married man like Octave, was in the highest degree insulting. Octave heard him. He had a loaded gun in his hand, and took aim and fired. Montlouis fell. We rushed to him, but he never breathed again. The ball had gone through his heart. I was overwhelmed with consternation; but I never saw anything so terrible as Octave's despair. He tore his hair, and fell on his knees beside the body. Ludovic was the only one of us who retained his coolness. "We must call this an accident," he said, promptly. "My master fired into the wood, supposing Montlouis to be in another direction." We therefore studied the ground, carefully arranged a statement, and swore to each other not to swerve from it. It was I who went before the justice of the peace at Bivron and filed the affidavit, which was received without the least suspicion. But what a day! My pulse has been beating eighty-six to the minute. I am dreadfully feverish, and shall probably not sleep all night. Octave is almost crazy, and God only knows what will happen!"

Extended almost in his low easy-chair, the count had listened to this narrative without evincing the least emotion one way or the other. Was he overwhelmed? Was he seeking for some means of consigning to oblivion this phantom of the past which had so suddenly risen before him, terrible and threatening. Mascarot watched him keenly, anxious as to the effect the narrative might have. Suddenly the count straightened himself up, for all the world like a man who, on waking, realises that he has been terrified by mere nightmare. "This is utter nonsense," he said, calmly.

"Very clear nonsense, at all events," murmured Mascarot. "Nonsense which might easily deceive the wisest of men. Nothing could be plainer or more precise."

"Suppose I could prove to you," resumed the count, "that this narrative is not merely absurd, but false; that it is the outcome of a lunatic's hallucinations."

Mascarot shook his head sadly. "We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by false hopes," he sighed; "for our awakening would be all the more terrible." He boldly spoke in the plural, thus associating himself, Mascarot, the obscure agent, dabbling in dark dishonourable dealings, with the proud Comte de Mussidan, who traced his title back to half-forgotten centuries. And strange as it may seem, the count, far from looking indignant, all but smiled. "We might maintain," continued Mascarot, "that the Baron de Clinchan made this entry in a moment of temporary insanity, were it not for the fact that it is followed by other entries. Let me read them."

"Very well, I am listening."

"Three days later," resumed B. Mascarot, "when M. de Clinchan had had time to recover in some measure from the shock he had experienced, he nevertheless wrote as follows:—'1842, Oct. 29th.—My health renders me very anxious. I feel neuralgic pains in all my joints; this utter disturbance of my system comes from all this trouble about Octave. I have been obliged to appear before an investigating magistrate. He has such a piercing look, one might fancy he could read one's thoughts. I notice with terror that there is some variation between my first statement and my second one. So as not to contradict myself, I must put my evidence down

in writing, and learn it by heart. That would be particularly useful for the public trial. Ludovic is wonderfully self-possessed and very intelligent. I should like to take him into my service. I scarcely dare go out, for I am pestered by people who insist on hearing all the particulars of the accident. In the Sauvebourg family alone, I have had to tell the story nineteen times already?"

"Now," asked Mascarot, "what do you think of this?"

Instead of answering the question, M. de Mussidan exclaimed, "Pray finish your perusal."

"Willingly. The third entry, although brief, is none the less important. It occurs a month after the event: '1842, Nov. 23rd—It is all over thank heaven! I have this moment left the court. Octave is acquitted; Ludovic has been admirable throughout. He explained the accident so skilfully, that no one in court had the faintest suspicion of the truth. Everything considered, the fellow is too clever, too sharp. He shall be no servant of mine. At last my turn to give evidence came. I had to raise my hand and swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. I was quite unprepared for the emotion which seized hold of me. At the thought that I was about to perjure myself, my arm seemed as heavy as lead, I could barely raise it to take the oath. Ah! perjury carries its own punishment. On returning to my place I felt dreadfully oppressed, and my pulse was certainly down to forty. And yet all this is the result of a moment's anger. For a whole year I must each day note this maxim in my diary: '*Never yield to your first impulse.*' In point of fact," continued Mascarot, "M. de Clinchan headed each page of his journal with those words during many months afterwards. I am told this by the people who had his diary in their possession."

This was at least the tenth time that Mascarot had spoken of the "people," whose unwilling emissary he pretended to be, and yet M. de Mussidan seemingly paid no attention to the term, and quite neglected to ask who these people were. His reticence was extraordinary, not to say alarming. He had now risen, and was walking with apparent difficulty up and down the room. It seemed as if he hoped in this way to collect his ideas, or perhaps he wished to prevent his visitor from reading his feelings by the expression of his face. "Is this everything?" he asked, suddenly.

"Yes, everything, Monsieur le Comte."

"Then do you know what an impartial judge would say?"

"I think so—"

"He would say," interrupted the count, "that a man in full possession of his senses would never have written such things. There are certain matters that a man strives to forget, which he does not even whisper to his pillow, and it is hardly likely he would commit them to paper. That paper might be lost, or stolen, or it might fall into the hands of indiscreet heirs. It is impossible to believe that a sensible man, guilty of perjury in a court of justice, of a crime punishable with hard labour, would amuse himself by noting all the particulars of his perjury in his diary, with a full analysis of his feelings."

B. Mascarot looked compassionately at the count. "My opinion," said he, "is that you will find no outlet in that direction. Your theory is not tenable—no lawyer would accept it. If the other thirty odd volumes of M. de Clinchan's journal were produced in court, it is more than probable that several other enormities quite as surprising would be found."

The count was plainly reflecting, but his countenance dispi-

anxiety. It seemed as if he had come to some decision, and was prolonging the discussion merely so as to gain time. "Well," he said, "I relinquish this theory. But who will tell me that these papers are not forged? Handwriting is easily imitated now-a-days, and even the Bank of France occasionally has a difficulty in separating counterfeit notes from among its own."

"Oh," replied B. Mascarot, "the identity of the handwriting can be verified. And, besides, it will be found that three leaves are missing from the Baron's diary for 1842."

"But that proves nothing."

"I beg your pardon, it proves everything. Let me show you that this new system of defence is worth as little as the other. Of course, I know as well as you that the Baron de Clinchan will say whatever you may bid him say."

"Pray, proceed."

"Suppose the torn-out leaves should accurately fit into the volume. Would not that evidence be satisfactory?"

The count smiled ironically as if he held in reserve a powerful argument. "Is that really your opinion?" he asked.

"Indeed it is."

"Then I suppose all I can do is to confess?"

"Oh! with such proofs against one it isn't a question of confession, but one of conviction."

"Very well, then—it is true Montlouis was killed by me, precisely as Clinchan has said. And Clinchan, although frightfully imprudent, is nevertheless a man of honour. He knew the reasons which so enraged me during my discussion with Montlouis, but he rightly made no mention of them in his narrative."

B. Mascarot greeted the count's acknowledgments with a sigh of relief, and yet he felt somewhat nervous on account of the turn the interview was taking, and was surprised by M. de Mussidan's easy, indifferent tone.

"However," resumed the count, "your employers are great fools to think that they can use this immense misfortune as a weapon against me." So saying, he took a weighty tome from one of the book shelves, searched through it for a moment, and then placed it open in front of Mascarot. "This," said he "is the Criminal Investigation Code. Come, see here—read clause 637. 'Criminal action, and the civil action resulting therefrom, for a crime punishable by death, or imprisonment for life, shall be barred after the lapse of ten years.'"

The count evidently expected that these few words would crush the bland personage seated before him. Not in the least! Far from looking surprised, Mascarot smiled more blandly than ever. "Ah!" he answered "I, too, know something of law. The first day that I was spoken to on this matter, I turned to that same clause, and read those very words aloud."

"Well, and what did they say?"

"Why this, 'We know all about the Code. If there were no prescription we shouldn't need your services. We should simply call on the count, and he would only be too pleased to offer us half his fortune.'"

Mascarot's air and tone of assurance were such that the count realised that some infallible means had been devised of utilizing against him this crime of earlier times. What means it was he could not say, but he realised that it must certainly exist. And yet, although his heart sunk

within him, he at least contrived to master all outward signs of emotion. "Come," said he "so I have saved half my fortune; for I suppose your employers will not be so exacting, now that these scraps of paper stolen from my friend have become absolutely worthless."

"Worthless, do you say?"

"Certainly, for it seems to me that on this point the law is sufficiently precise."

Mascarot adjusted his spectacles, as he always did when he was about to say something serious.

"You are right, Monsieur le Comte," he replied. "No one thinks of reaching you by any judicial prosecution. You cannot be punished in any way, for this murder which was committed twenty-three years ago."

"Then—"

"Excuse me. The people for whom I so unwillingly act, and for whom indeed, I blush, have planned a little scheme which will, I fancy prove as disagreeable to you, not to say disastrous, as to your friend the baron."

"And might I ask you to explain this extremely ingenious scheme?"

"Certainly: it was to give you this explanation that I came here to-day." He hesitated for a moment, as if seeking for the proper terms in which to expose his plan, and then continued: "Let us first admit that you will reject the request I shall have to make to you."

"Dear me, do you call this making a request."

"Pshaw! we need not quibble over words. Well, I will suppose you decline a compromise. Now, what happens? Why to-morrow my clients—I am ashamed to call them thus—will prevail on a well-known newspaper to print M. de Clinchan's touching narrative under the title of "The Story of a Shooting Party." The names will not appear in full, so far as the baron and yourself are concerned; but the reader will easily be able to identify you, and, besides, there will be some additional particulars."

"You forget, sir, that there are courts, and that proof is not admitted in a case of defamation of character."

The agent shrugged his shoulders. "Oh! my people forget nothing, and, in fact, their plan is based on this very point. For the reason you mention they will introduce into the story a fifth personage, one of themselves, an accomplice, whose name will be printed in full. As soon as the article appears, he will create a disturbance, and bring an action against the paper. He will declare he has been infamously slandered, and insist upon proving in a court of justice that he was not even present at this shooting party."

"And then?"

"Then, this same individual will summon the Baron de Clinchan, Ludovic the groom, and yourself as witnesses before the court, to prove that he was not with you. He will employ an advocate, a member of his own band, already retained, and the advocate while speaking on the question of damages will naturally say something to this effect: 'It is clear that M. de Mussidan is a murderer, and we know that the Baron de Clinchan has committed perjury, for we have it in his own handwriting. Ludovic moreover was their accomplice, but my client, an honourable man, must by no means be confounded with these three culprits.' Have I explained myself clearly?"

Alas, yes! so clearly and with such pitiless logic that escape seemed hopeless. At one glance the count realised the future. He divined the disgrace, the scandal such a suit would cause. He pictured all France

gloating over the details. And yet such was his character, and so impatient was he of all constraint, that he was more desperate than crushed. He knew life and men. He realised that the wretches who threatened him must have reason to dread the sharp eyes of the law, and said to himself that if he refused to listen to them, they would probably not dare to accomplish their purpose. If the question had only concerned himself he would assuredly have run all risks, and resisted to the bitter end; and as a beginning, would have given himself the satisfaction of inflicting corporal punishment on the impudent scoundrel before him. But could he expose his devoted friend Clinchan, already so compromised, to the consequences a refusal might entail? Clinchan was timid and nervous by nature, and would not long survive such exposure. These thoughts and many others flashed through his mind while he paced up and down the library. He was undecided whether to submit, or to throw the agent out of the window.

His excited air and nervous ejaculations, furnished ample proof of the contest raging in his mind. It needed indeed an amount of impudence approaching to heroism to brave a man of his kind—a man who, when his blood was up, shot a fellow creature like a rabbit. But Mascarot was familiar with peril; and whilst asking himself whether he would leave the room by the door or the window, he twirled his thumbs with an air of quiet unconcern.

At last, recovering his self-control with a great effort, the count decided to follow the course which prudence indicated. Pausing abruptly in front of the agent, and without in the least degree hiding his contempt, he curtly said, "Let us end this. How much do you want for these papers?"

Mascarot had assumed the aggrieved air of an honest man, wrongly suspected. "Oh! Monsieur le Comte," he began,—"you cannot believe me capable—"

M. de Mussidan shrugged his shoulders. "At least," said he, "credit me with as much intelligence as you yourself possess. What amount do you demand?"

For the first time the agent seemed somewhat embarrassed, and hesitated. "It is not money that my clients desire," he said, at last.

"Not money!" replied the count, in astonishment.

"No, but a thing which is nothing to you, and yet of the greatest possible importance to those who send me. I am charged to tell you that you may rest in peace if you will consent to break off the marriage now projected between mademoiselle, your daughter, and Monsieur de Erenlhaverlay. The leaves from the baron's journal will be handed to you whenever your daughter marries any other person you may select."

These singular conditions were so much at variance with the count's expectations that he could hardly believe his ears. "But this is absolute madness," he muttered.

"It is sincere, nevertheless," was the reply.

Suddenly the count started—an atrocious suspicion had flashed through his mind. "Do you intend," he asked, "as your next step, to impose on me a son-in-law of your own choosing?"

Mascarot drew himself erect. "I have enough knowledge of character," he answered, "to feel certain that, even to save yourself, you would never consent to sacrifice your daughter."

"But—"

"You are mistaken in regard to the motives of my clients. They

threaten you, it is true, but it is really M. de Breulh whom they wish to reach. They have sworn he shall never marry an heiress like your daughter."

So great was the count's amazement, that he unwittingly gave an entirely different turn to the interview. He still resisted, but in a dispassionate manner, answering rather the objections which occurred to himself, than the remarks of his strange visitor. "Monsieur de Breulh has my word," he said.

"An excuse can surely be found."

"But the countess, my wife, is in favour of the marriage; she talks of it constantly, and I should meet with great opposition from her."

The agent thought it wiser not to answer this objection.

"Then," continued the count, "my daughter will probably feel regret at this rupture."

Thanks to Florestan, Mascaret knew how much importance to attach to this. "Oh!" said he, "Mademoiselle Sabine, with her age, position, and education, is not likely to have any decided preference."

For another quarter of an hour the count continued struggling. It was a sore humiliation indeed, to have to comply with the dictates of these scoundrels. But he realised that he was at their mercy, and so at last he yielded. "Well, let it be so," he finally exclaimed; "my daughter shall not marry Monsieur de Breulh."

Mascaret had triumphed, and yet his expression did not change. He walked backwards as he retired from the room, bowed to the very floor, and exaggerated each mark of respect. Once on the stairs, however, he rubbed his hands together. "If Hortebize has been as successful on his side," he muttered "we may consider the game as won."

VI.

THE expedients which Mascaret had been obliged to resort to, in seeking a private interview with the Count de Mussidan, were not needed by Dr. Hortebize in reference to the countess. As soon as he presented himself, five minutes after the agent's arrival, the two footmen yawning in the hall received him with fitting respect. They recognised the man of the world, admitted to the acquaintance, if not to the intimacy, of their master and mistress. And yet their tone, and the glances they exchanged as they jointly answered, "Yes, Madame la Comtesse receives," would have given a less initiated visitor something to think about. Plainly they were surprised to be able to say that Madame de Mussidan was at home. Their surprise was natural enough, for, as a rule, the countess might be met in the Bois, at the races, or at the Academy; at some restaurant or theatre, or in some shop; at some lecture perchance, or at the rehearsal of a new opera; in the studio of a fashionable artist, or in the drawing-room of a professor of music, listening to the first efforts of some newly discovered tenor—in short, anywhere and everywhere excepting at home. Her's was one of those restless, erratic natures always on the alert, excitable to a degree, finding no pleasure or satisfaction save in the stir and bustle of society. She scarcely ever gave a thought to her husband; her daughter, or her home. She had other cares to occupy her mind. She collected for the poor after mass. She presided over a society for the relief of repentant unfortunates, she patronised an almshouse for old men. Good works by

ever, occupied but a portion of her time. Her extravagance was unparalleled. The largest fortune would have failed to satisfy her whims. People asked themselves if she had ever the faintest notion of the value of money. Handfuls of gold melted between her fingers as handfuls of snow might have done. What did she do with all this precious metal? No one knew—she herself could scarcely have answered the question.

To these failings was attributed the estrangement which prevailed between herself and her husband. The count had to bear the burden of matrimony without reaping any of its advantages. He resided in a splendid mansion, admirably appointed, with a score of servants ready to obey his bidding, and yet he really had no home. For years and years, it was said, he had waited for his wife at lunch and at dinner. Sometimes she had chosen to turn up, but more frequently she never put in an appearance. At last M. de Mussidan, worn out by repeated struggles, relapsed on his side into bachelor life, lunched at the Café Richo, and dined at his club.

Dr. Hortelizo knew all this and many other things as well; so in no wise disturbed, he followed the footman whose duty it was to announce his visit. In the vast reception-room, magnificently upholstered, and yet as cold and dreary as all rooms which are seldom if ever occupied, the Countess de Mussidan reclined on a lounge near the fireplace. She was reading. At sight of the physician, however, she hastily rose to her feet, and with evident pleasure exclaimed, "How kind of you, doctor, to come and see me." So saying, she motioned the footman to advance an arm-chair.

The countess was forty-five, but, tall and slender, she had almost the figure of a young girl. Her hair, remarkably abundant, was extremely fair, and thus the silvery threads, scattered through it here and there, were all but imperceptible. Her person exhaled a refined aristocratic perfume, and her eyes, of a light almost milky blue, expressed intense pride and cold disdain.

"Really, doctor," she resumed, "you know how to time your visits. I am weary of coming. I am wearied of books; for no matter what I read, I find I have read it before in one form or another. In calling on me so appropriately, you must really have signed a compact with chance."

The physician had indeed signed a compact, only the name of his chance was Masecot.

"I receive so seldom," continued Madame de Mussidan, "that no one now-a-days condescends to visit me. I must really set apart one day in the week for my friends. As it is, whenever I stay at home, the solitude and loneliness is something frightful. For two mortal days I have not been out of doors. I have been taking care of the count."

This assertion was so singular and so bold that it would have surprised even a better informed man. But the doctor smiled right pleasantly, and ejaculated, "Really!" in just the proper tone.

"Yes," continued the countess; "Monsieur de Mussidan slipped on the stairs, the day before yesterday, and really hurt himself severely. Our medical man says it is nothing; but I seldom believe anything that doctors say."

"I know that by experience, madame."

"Oh, as to that, doctor, it's quite a different matter. I assure you that I used to have great faith in you. Only I admit it, I felt frightened after your conversion to homeopathy."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "That school is as good as the other," he said.

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

Madame de Mussidan was pleased to smile. "I am strongly tempted," she said, "now that you are here, to ask your advice."

"You are not indisposed, madame, I hope?"

"I? no, indeed! Heaven be praised! that would really be a blow. But I am very anxious respecting my daughter's health."

"Ah!" ejaculated Hortebize. The countess's maternal anxiety was on a par with her conjugal devotion, and the doctor's "Ah!" was quite as good as his "Really."

"Yes, indeed. For a month, doctor, I have scarcely seen Sabine, I have been so much occupied. Yesterday, however, I met her, and I was really shocked to find such a change in her."

"Did you ask her if she was suffering in any way?"

"Certainly, and she said no—in fact, that she was perfectly well."

"Perhaps she has had some little annoyance?"

"She? Why she is one of the happiest girls in Paris. But I should like you to see her, nevertheless." So saying she rang, and a servant at once appeared. "Lubin," said the countess, "ask Mademoiselle Sabine to come down here."

"Mademoiselle Sabine has gone out, Madame la Comtesse."

"Indeed, and how long ago?"

"Mademoiselle went out at about three o'clock."

"And who was with her?"

"Her maid, Mademoiselle Modeste."

"Did mademoiselle say where she was going?"

"No, Madame la Comtesse."

"Very well, that will do."

The servant thereupon bowed and retired.

Now imperturbable as the doctor usually was, he could not help feeling somewhat astonished at finding that Sabine de Mussidan, a girl of eighteen, was as free as this. She had plainly gone out without warning, no one knew whither, and yet her mother considered it all quite natural.

"It is really annoying," resumed the countess, "very annoying! However, let us hope that the indisposition I fear will not delay her marriage." Hortebize was delighted. The countess had broached the very subject to which he had feared he must lead with infinite precautions and trouble. "Is Mademoiselle Sabine to be married, then?" he asked with an air of respectful interest.

Madame de Mussidan raised a finger to her lips. "Hush!" said she, "it is a great secret, and nothing is absolutely settled. But you are a physician, that is to say, as discreet as a confessor by profession, and I feel I can trust you. It is more than probable that before the end of the year Sabine will be Madame de Breulh-Faverlay."

It is certain that Hortebize was less audacious than Mascarot, whose plans had indeed often made the doctor turn pale and recoil. But once consenting, he could be relied on, and went straight to the point without compunction or hesitations. "I must acknowledge, madame, that I have heard of this before," he answered slowly.

"Indeed; folks talk about us?"

"A great deal. And here, let me say, that it was not chance, as you supposed, that brought me here to-day. In fact, I came to speak to you about this very marriage."

Madame de Mussidan liked Dr. Hortebize, and had often enjoyed his

witty conversation and the social gossip he was always ready to relate. She saw no reason why she should not receive him from time to time, and indeed, she willingly talked to him in a familiar way; but she considered that she had conceded him enough, and felt indignant that he should presume to meddle with the family matters of such a high and noble dame as herself, Comtesse de Mussidan by marriage, and a daughter by birth of the noble house of Sauvebourg. "Really, doctor," said she, "you confer a very great honour on the count and myself by thus interesting yourself in this marriage."

These simple words were accentuated by such a stinging glance, that the least sensitive person would have felt wounded in his self-esteem. But Dr. Hortebize was there for other purposes than to lose his temper. He had come to say certain things in a certain way. He had studied and prepared his part in advance, and was not to be turned from his purpose by anything the countess might say. In explanation and repartee he was greatly Mascarot's superior, for the agent was far less proficient in the art of conversational shading and finessing, in allowing things to be understood without saying them outright—in fact, in fully expressing what he wished to convey without wounding his listener's susceptibility. Mascarot fully recognised Hortebize's superiority in these respects, and no doubt envied it. "It is a question of birth," he would say to himself. "Hortebize belongs to a good family, he has received an excellent education, and has always moved among the upper ten; whereas I only know what I have taught myself—I am a self-made man."

But let us return to Madame de Mussidan's drawing-room. Hortebize, for the time being, submitted the countess's affront with all due meekness of spirit. "Believe me, madame," he answered, "when I accepted the mission which brings me here, I did so inspired by the most respectful devotion for you and yours."

"Ah!" rejoined the countess, in a supercilious tone, "ah! so you are devoted to us?"

"Yes, madame; and I am sure, after you have heard all I have to say, that you will have still greater reasons to be of that opinion!"

He said this in such a singular tone, that Madame de Mussidan started as if she had received a shock from an electric battery.

"For twenty-five years," continued the doctor, "I have been the constant recipient of family secrets. I have had to listen to most horrible revelations, I have often and often been in most trying and difficult positions, but never in my whole life have I been so embarrassed as at this moment."

"What! it's so serious as that?" observed the countess, forgetting to be impertinent.

"Perhaps so. However, if I come to you from a madman, as I hope is the case, I shall make you, as in duty-bound, the most humble apologies. If, on the contrary, what the person who has come to me, asserts is true—if he has in his possession the absolute proofs he pretends—"

"Then, doctor?"

"Then, madame, I can only say, make use of me; for there is one man who will serve you unto death, and I am he."

The countess laughed with as much sincerity, no doubt, as the heir to some large fortune would weep. "Really," said she, "your funereal aspect and solemn voice will kill me—with laughing."

The doctor reflected. "She laughs too loud and too soon," thought he.

"Mascarot is right. Let us be prudent." Accordingly he replied aloud, "I trust, madame, that I may laugh, too, at my own chimerical fears. But whatever happens, allow me to remind you of what you said a few moments since: 'A physician is a confessor.' That is true, madame. Like the priest, the physician hears secrets only to forget them. He must also learn to comfort and console, with more ability, too, than the priest, for his profession brings him more directly in contact with the passions and temptations of life. He understands and excuses the impulses, the fatalities—"

"And, doctor, you must not forget to add," interrupted the countess, "that, like the priest, he preaches too." She launched this arrow with a comic air of affected gravity, but it elicited no smile from Hortebize, who became in fact more solemn than ever. "I may be absurd," he said: "and, indeed, I had better be that than re-open some painful wound which you had supposed closed for ever."

"Oh! don't fear that, doctor."

"Then, madame, I will begin by asking if you retain any recollection of a young man of your own circle, who in the early years of your married life enjoyed a certain social reputation in Paris. I speak of the Marquis George de Croisenois."

Madame de Mussidan had thrown herself back on the settee, with her eyes raised to the ceiling, and her brow contracted, as if vainly endeavouring to recall the name. "The Marquis de Croisenois," she murmured. "It seems to me—wait a moment. No, doctor, I really do not remember any such person."

Her hearer thought it his duty to quicken this rebellious memory. "The Croisenois, I speak of," said he, "had a brother, Henry, whom you certainly know, for I saw him this winter dancing with your daughter at a ball given by the Duc de Sairmeuse."

"Ah, yes; you are right. I do recall the name now." The countess spoke with admirable self-possession, and an air of utter indifference.

"Then, perhaps, you also remember that some twenty-three years ago George de Croisenois, suddenly disappeared. This disappearance caused a terrible stir at the time—it was the event of the season. The Minister of the Interior was even questioned in parliament concerning it."

"Yes, I fancy I recollect."

"George was seen for the last time at the Café de Paris, where he dined with some friends. At nine o'clock he rose to leave; one of his friends offered to accompany him, but he refused. He was asked if they would see him later, and he answered, 'perhaps so, at the opera; but at all events they were not to count upon him.' It was, therefore, supposed that he was going to some rendezvous."

"Ah! his friends thought that?"

"Yes for although he was a man of fashion, a 'lion' as people said in those times, he was yet more carefully dressed than usual. However, at all events, he went away alone, and was never seen again."

"Never again," added the countess, a little too gaily, perhaps.

The doctor remained unmoved. "Never again," he repeated. "The first two or three days his friends thought it extraordinary; at the end of a week they grew anxious."

"You are most precise in your details, doctor."

"They are all true, madame. I knew them all at the time, but had forgotten them, and they were only this morning brought back to my mind."

They are to be found, with many others, in the report of the minute legal inquiry, which took place. -De Croisenois' friends had searched after him themselves, and meeting with no success, they called in the assistance of the police. The most skilful detectives were put on the track. The first suspicion was one of suicide. George might have gone to some wood near Paris and have blown out his brains there; but then he was in a prosperous position, his fortune was ample, and his evident happiness and ease of mind showed that this supposition was groundless. Then, the idea of a murder gained ground, and the investigations were conducted on that basis. However, nothing was discovered—nothing!

The countess stifled a yawn of doubtful sincerity, and repeated, like an echo, "Nothing!"

"The police were as disconcerted as possible, when three months later, one of George's friends received a letter from him."

"Ah! he was not dead then?"

The physician made a mental note of the countess's air and tone to analyze them at his leisure. "Who knows?" he answered. "In this letter, dated from Cairo, George said, that weary of life in Paris, he was about to explore the interior of Africa, and that no anxiety need be felt in regard to him. As you may suppose, this letter seemed suspicious. A man does not start off on such an expedition without proper funds; and it was proved that the marquis had not more than a thousand francs about him, more than half that sum being in Spanish *onzas*, which he had won at cards before dinner. The letter was, therefore, regarded as a forger's ruse. However, the most renowned experts pronounced the writing to be Croisenois' and so two agents were at once dispatched to Cairo, but neither there nor along the route had any one seen aught of the missing man—not a trace, not a clue."

Hortebize spoke as leisurely as possible, watching the countess, all the while, but her face never changed.

"Eh!" said she as he paused. "Have you already finished?"

Hortebize's eyes met hers before he answered. "Perhaps not. A man who called to see me yesterday morning pretends that you, madame, can tell what became of George de Croisenois."

In moral resistance a strong man is weaker than a feeble woman. However vigorous minded he may be, however bold and hardened, he will allow his inner feelings to be divined, whilst a woman will undergo any amount of mental torture with a smiling face. In dissimulation a young girl is the superior of expert diplomatists, even where they blend the cunning of Fouché with the genius of Talleyrand. Crushed by the weight of evidence, a man falls upon his knees, but a woman holds her head still higher, and fights on to the bitter end. God said to Cain, "What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?" and Cain was overwhelmed. A woman, on the contrary, would have denied and argued. At the mere name of Montlouis the Count de Mussidan had turned pale, and tottered as if struck by a mallet; but the countess met Hortebize's formal charge with a peal of laughter, loud and clear and fresh, such thorough laughter indeed, that it seemed to prevent her from replying.

"Oh, doctor!" she said at last, "your little tale is most interesting; but I really think you ought to consult a somnambulist, rather than me, in regard to the fate of M. de Croisenois."

Hortebize, as we have said, was expert in repartee, and played his "parts" with consummate skill. Accordingly, far from looking surprised or dis-

concerted at the countess's hilarity, he drew a long breath, as if relieved from a heavy burden, and ejaculated with intense delight: "Heaven be praised! I have been deceived."

He spoke so naturally, with such an honest intonation, that the countess was thoroughly deceived. "However," she resumed, "I should be glad to know the name of the practical joker who pretends to possess such wonderful knowledge?"

"Pshaw!" answered Hortebize, "what is the good? He has made a fool of me, and made me run the risk of displeasing you, madame: that is quite enough. To-morrow, if he presents himself, my servant will treat him in accordance with his deserts. Indeed, if I followed my inclination, I should enter a complaint—"

"What are you thinking of?" interrupted Madame de Mussidan. "Enter a complaint? That would transform utter nonsense into an important matter. However, tell me the name of your mysterious personage. Do I know him?"

"No, madame. That is impossible; he is so far beneath you. His name will teach you nothing. He is a man whom I doctored once—now long ago. If I am not mistaken he is a lawyer's clerk. He is called Father Tantaine."

"Tantaine?"

"A mere nickname, no doubt. The old fellow is wretchedly poor, a kind of cynical philosopher, with considerable intelligence; and it was precisely this last fact that troubled me. I said to myself that, plainly enough, he did not come from his master the lawyer, that he was rather the instrument of some dangerous folks, who preferred to remain in the background, and whom one might be unable to capture."

The countess could not help thinking that the doctor was too easily re-assured. "But Dr. Hortebize," she insisted, "you spoke to me of threats and proofs, and some mysterious power—"

"Certainly, madame; but I simply repeated Father Tantaine's words. The old fool said to me, 'Madame de Mussidan knows the fate of the marquis. It is clearly shown by the letters she has received from him, as well as from the Duc de Champdoce.'"

This time the physician's dart reached home. The countess started to her feet as if impelled by a spring; she was deadly pale, her eyes dilated with horror, and her lips quivered, as in a hoarse voice she exclaimed, "My letters!"

A stranger would have pitied Hortebize, so utterly overwhelmed did he seem by the consternation he had caused. "Your letters, madame?" he answered with evident hesitation, "why that rascal Tantaine pretends he has them in his possession—"

Madame de Mussidan shrieked like a lioness bereft of her cubs. "The villain!" she gasped at last; and then turning suddenly away, without further thought of Hortebize, she rushed from the room. Her rapid foot-fall could be heard on the stairs, with the frou-frou of her silk skirts against the balusters.

Left to his own devices, the doctor rose. "Look!" he murmured, with a cynical smile—"look, search, and you will see that the birds have flown." He went to one of the windows, and tapped with his finger-tips on the glass. "It is said," he reflected, "that Mascarot never makes a mistake. It is impossible not to admire his infernal penetration, his impenetrable logic. Taking the most trivial circumstances as his guide, he

reasons out a whole lifetime, just as the savant who, on glancing at the leaf blown to his feet by the autumn wind, says what tree it has grown on, and describes its blossom and fruit. Ah! if he had but applied his wonderful ability, his extraordinary activity, his audacity, proof against all rebuffs, to some noble end!" At this thought his brow grew dark, and he began to pace the room, pursuing his soliloquy. "But no," he continued, "at this moment he is upstairs occupied in martyring De Mussidan, while I, in this room, am set to torture the countess. What a profession! And to think this has been going on for five-and-twenty years. Ah! there are days when I feel that I have paid dearly for my apparently easy life. Without counting"—here he fingered his medallion—"without counting that the day may come when we shall find our masters—and then the end!"

He paused: the countess was on the threshold. A nervous quiver shook her limbs, she was ghastly pale, and her eyes had a strange fixity of expression, such as often shows itself in moments of mental derangement. She was plainly terrified. "I have been robbed," she exclaimed in a loud voice, so troubled and pre-occupied that she forgot she had left the door open behind her, and that the servants in the hall might easily overhear her.

Fortunately, however, Dr. Hortebize had a cool head. With the ease of an actor remedying a property man's forgetfulness, he walked to the door and shut it. "What has been stolen?" he asked.

"My letters—I cannot find them." Then sinking on to the settee, she resumed, in the curt, grating tone which consciousness of imminent peril usually imparts, "And yet these letters were in an iron casket, fastened by a secret lock, and this casket was hidden at the bottom of a deep drawer, the key of which never leaves me. How can the letters have been stolen? There were no outward signs of robbery."

Hortebize had resumed his air of consternation. "Tantaine spoke the truth then?" said he.

"He spoke the truth," replied the countess. "Yes, I am at this moment the veriest slave to people whose names I do not know. They are my masters—I cannot hope to resist them." As she spoke, she hid her face in her hands, as if through pride she wished to conceal her despair.

"Are these letters so overwhelming then?" asked the doctor.

"I am lost," she answered.

The doctor looked as though he were racking his brain to find some loophole of escape for the unfortunate woman before him.

"Ah!" continued the countess, "I was guilty—I was foolish in those old days. I knew nothing of life—I hated, I sought vengeance. And all the weapons prepared for others are now turned against me. I dug a pit for my enemies, and now I must lie buried in it myself."

Worthy Dr. Hortebize took care to offer no interruption. The countess was in one of those moods of utter despair, when all that is in the depths of the soul rises to the surface, like sea-weed to the crest of the waves during a tempest. "I would far rather die!" she moaned—"yes, die, rather than see these letters in my husband's hands. Poor Octave! Have I not occasioned him sufficient suffering already? Ah! I learned to know and appreciate him only too late. And now, doctor, what am I threatened with—with exposure, of course. These letters will be given to my husband if I do not consent—to what? It is money they want, of course; a great deal of money. How much?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Not money?" exclaimed the countess. "What then? Pray speak!—don't torture me in this needless fashion."

When alone with his conscience, Hortebize confessed that his speculations were abominable, admitted the great risks he incurred, and not having a naturally cruel mind, often pitied his victims. But the game having begun he forgot his cares, nerved himself against compassion, and went on without faltering to the bitter end. "What is asked of you, Madame la Comtesse," he replied, "is either very little or else a great deal. Everything depends on the way you look at it."

"What is it—I have strength to hear!"

"Well these fatal letters will be returned to you on the day Mademoiselle Sabine marries Henri de Croisenois, George's brother."

Madame de Mussidan's astonishment was so great that she stood motionless, as if rooted to the spot.

"I have been commissioned to inform you," continued the doctor, "that you will be allowed any delay you may ask for to modify present plans. But pray be careful, for I am quite certain that should your daughter marry any one else than the Marquis de Croisenois, your letters would at once be delivered to your husband."

As he spoke, Hortebize watched for the effect of his words out of the corner of his eye. His expectations were surpassed, for the countess rose so faint and dizzy that she had to lean on the mantel-shelf for support.

"Then there is nothing more to be said," she exclaimed. "It is out of my power to grant what is asked of me. Perhaps it is better so. I shall have no agony of suspense to bear. My fate is sealed. Go, doctor, go and say to the scoundrel who stole my letters, that he can take them to the count."

The countess's tone was so decided that Hortebize scarcely knew what to think. Was there really some insurmountable obstacle to the plans which Mascarot had matured?

"It is true then," continued Madame de Mussidan, "there are scoundrels vile enough to trade on the shames and sorrows they discover, scoundrels who earn a livelihood and make their fortunes at this business. I had heard speak of it before, but I had never believed it. I said to myself that such an idea had its sole foundation in the unhealthy imagination of novelists. I was mistaken, it seems. Nevertheless, these infamous scoundrels must not rejoice too swiftly. They will not profit by their villainy. There is one refuge left to me—a refuge beyond the tomb."

"Madame!" exclaimed the doctor, imploringly, "Madame la Comtesse!"

But his entreaties were fruitless; she was beyond all possibility of heeding or even hearing his remonstrances. She continued speaking, her tone increasing in violence, as she recapitulated all she had suffered. "Do the villains think that I fear death? Ah! for years I have implored it as a crowning mercy from the God I have offended. I long for the rest of the grave! It surprises you, perhaps, to hear me speak like this—I who was the beautiful, the flattered Diane de Sauvebourg, Countess de Mussidan—happy no doubt in the world's judgment! But at the time of my most splendid fêtes, when my triumphs excited so much jealousy, I had already drained the cup of suffering. And since then—ah! now-a-days my best friends, surprised at my conduct, ask themselves if I am not deranged—mad. Ah! I wish I only were. Those who are astonished by my feverish restlessness and life of perpetual excitement, don't know that I am ever and ever seek-

ing to forget the presence of a phantom by my side—a phantom which never leaves me, which follows me everywhere without relenting! They cannot divine that solitude terrifies me—that I dare not be alone—that I must have distraction at any cost. But, alas! I have learned by this time, that nothing, not all the noise of the universe, can stifle the murmur of my own conscience!”

She spoke like a woman who has nothing more to hope for, whose final sacrifice is made. Her clear, ringing voice resounded through the room; and Dr. Hortebize turned pale, as he heard the servants, busy with preparations for dinner, pass constantly to and fro across the hall.

“How have I been able to endure such a life?” continued the countess. “Simply because through the mists of the future I fancied I could detect a glimpse of the light of hope. I often despaired, often thought of giving up the struggle. And it would, perhaps, have been better had I done so; for the light I saw was but a will o’ the wisp. You have proved that to me this very day. All hope has vanished. I see only thick darkness before me; and to-night, for the first time for many years, Diane de Mussidan will repose in a calm and dreamless sleep!”

The countess was in such a state of excitement, that the doctor asked himself in terror how he might subdue this explosion, which he had not foreseen. The countess’s loud voice would eventually startle the servants, and they might summon the count himself, at that very moment under Mascarot’s knife. What would happen in that case? Why the whole plot would simply be discovered and everything lost. Seeing that Madame de Mussidan was about to rush from the room, that words had no power to stop her, Hortebize summoned all his courage, and catching her by both wrists, compelled her almost by force to sit down. “In the name of heaven, madame!” he said in an unctuous, persuasive voice, “in the name of your daughter, listen to me. Do not yield so weakly. Am I not here? Am I not ready to serve you? If I have consented to act as the agent of those scoundrels, who inspire me with horror, surely it is because I hope to save you. Should I be here, if I thought that everything was lost? Count on me—on the devotion of a man who knows something of the world, and who is by no means devoid of heart. Cannot we two so combine our energies as to ward off the storm?”

The doctor talked on for some time in this persuasive manner, making as strenuous efforts to reassure the countess as he had previously made to surprise and overwhelm her. He was a medical man, remember, and knew how to staunch the blood and soothe the quivering flesh after performing a frightful operation. Soon he had the satisfaction of finding that his efforts were not thrown away. Madame de Mussidan listened to his rapid flow of words, and if she failed to grasp their meaning, at least they calmed her. She subsided into that state of nervous prostration which so often follows great excitement. At the end of a quarter of an hour, thanks to prodigies of skill, the doctor had succeeded in inducing her to look the situation fair in the face, and discuss its bearings. He breathed freely once more; and as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, felt that he had won the day. For if the countess accepted discussion she must be surely vanquished.

And yet she still repeated, “It is infamous! absolutely infamous!”

“Precisely, madame,” rejoined the doctor with alacrity; “but that does not alter the facts. Answer one question, if you please. Have you any special objection to Monsieur de Croisenois?”

"None, whatever."

"He is of good family, highly esteemed, well-bred, and well educated, handsome, moreover, and not more than thirty-four; for, as you know, his brother was the elder by fifteen years. Why, then, is it not a suitable match?"

"But—"

"To be sure he has been guilty of several follies; but can't we say as much of every young man? It is asserted that he is overwhelmed with debts, ruined in fact; but this is not true. Even if it were, your daughter is rich enough for both. Besides, George de Croisenois left a considerable fortune—not far from two millions, I should say. It is quite within the bounds of possibility that some day Henri will be placed in possession of this money."

Madame de Mussidan was too crushed by the emotion she had experienced to think of the strong objections she might have laid before the doctor. Indeed, despite repeated efforts, she could scarcely collect her scattered ideas. "Even supposing I consented," said she at last, "it would be of no avail, for M. de Mussidan has decided that Sabine shall marry M. de Breuhl-Faverlay, and I am not the mistress—"

"But if you chose you might persuade your husband—"

The countess shook her head, "Once upon a time," she answered sadly, "I, no doubt, reigned over Octave's heart. I was the controlling influence of his life. He loved me then—but now? Did I not tell you I was mad? I tired out a love which would have been as lasting as life itself. I killed it utterly, and now—" She hesitated, as if embarrassed by what she wished to say, and then added, more slowly, "And now we live as strangers. I have nothing to complain of; it is my own fault. He is good and just."

"But you can try."

"That I will do, doctor, certainly; but Sabine—Sabine may love M. de Breuhl?"

"Perhaps so, madame; but a mother has always so much influence with a daughter."

The countess caught hold of the doctor's hand, and grasped it so tightly that it pained him. "Must I disclose to you," she said in a hoarse voice, "the entire depth of my misery? I am a stranger to my husband, and my daughter despises and hates me!"

Many persons think that it would be a very simple matter to divide life into two distinct parts: the first given to pleasure—to the gratification of every fancy; and then later on, when the fire of passion has all but died away, might come repose and household happiness. Such an idea, however, is most erroneous. Old age is the natural sequence of youth—it is the effect which follows the cause, and proves either a reward or a punishment. This is not always distinguished in life, there are such deceptive happinesses. However, all those whom duty acquaints with family secrets—the magistrate, the priest, and the physician—know this to be one of the laws of humanity. Now the Countess de Mussidan's old age was surely to be no reward, rather a punishment; and, in fact, she was already expiating the follies of her earlier years.

However, Dr. Hortebize had no time to indulge in these reflections. The count might at any moment make his appearance, or a servant might knock to announce that dinner was ready. Accordingly, he momentarily renounced all ideas of further investigation, and merely sought to calm the

countess, to convince her that she was terrified by mere chimeras, that she could not possibly be a stranger to her husband, and that her daughter did not hate her. He was so insinuating and so persuasive, he so expatiated on the result his devotion might yield, that at last a ray of hope penetrated into her desolate heart. "Oh, doctor!" said she in a trembling voice, "it is only in the hours of misfortune that we learn to know our true friends." Like her husband, the countess had at last laid down her arms; her resistance had been more prolonged, but the result proved the same—under compulsion she surrendered. She promised she would set to work the next day, do her best to break off the projected marriage, and as soon as occasion offered, name M. Henri de Croisenols as an acceptable suitor for her daughter Sabine's hand.

The doctor could hope for nothing better. On his side he declared he would keep Tantaine quiet, and bring the countess intelligence from time to time of any steps taken by her adversaries. At last, these mutual promises having been exchanged, Hortebize withdrew; his interview with the countess having lasted fully a couple of hours. How glad he was to find it over! He was Mascarot's partner no doubt, and Mascarot may have had superhuman qualities; but he, Hortebize, was at least a man. Although the weather was very cold, the outdoor air seemed perfectly delicious to him; and as soon as he was in the street, he drew several long breaths, with the happy consciousness of having accomplished a disagreeable duty. He walked slowly up the Rue de Matignon, turned into the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, and at last entered the café where he and his honourable partner had agreed to meet. Mascarot was there, in a corner, seated before an untouched glass of beer, and hidden behind a huge newspaper which he pretended to be reading. In point of fact, he was dying of impatience, and started nervously each time a fresh customer opened the door. A thousand apprehensions troubled him, and he asked himself if Hortebize had encountered some unforeseen and insurmountable obstacle—one of those imperceptible grains of sand which, as Bossuet tells us in the memorable case of Cromwell, disarrange the most perfect combinations.

"Well?" asked he impatiently, as soon as the doctor appeared.

"Victory!" answered Hortebize, but as he sank on a chair, he added, "However, it has been a terrible task, and no mistake."

VII.

It will be remembered that on taking leave of B. Mascarot, his new protector, Paul Violaine stumbled down the stairs of the Employment Agency with the unsteady step of a tippler the worse for liquor. He was well-nigh as stunned by his sudden, unexpected good fortune, as if a paving-stone had fallen on his head. In a moment, without any transition so to say, he had passed from abject misery, haunted by thoughts of suicide, to a position of twelve thousand francs a year. Ay, the agent had said twelve thousand francs, a thousand francs per month, and he had offered to pay the first month in advance! It was certainly enough to bewilder a man, and it seemed to Paul that he was losing his senses. He could think of nothing but that handsome salary, so incredibly large under the circumstances; and dazzled, fascinated so to say, he did not pause to examine and analyse the various incidents which had conducted to this wonderful result. And yet they were strange enough, and well worthy of scrutiny. That old lawyer's

clerk turning up and lending him 500 francs just in the nick of time; that, employment agent, equally mysterious, acquainted moreover with the whole story of his life, and disposed to offer him such a remunerative position without the slightest hesitation.

Once in the street, however, under the influence of this moral intoxication, Paul did not think of hurrying to the Hôtel du Pérou with the great good news. Rose was no doubt waiting for him, but he did not give her a thought—thus already proving the exactitude of Dr Hortebize's prognostics.

Elated, as he was, by his sudden prosperity, it seemed to him that his joy would be all the greater could he relate, in fact, proclaim, his change of fortune *urbi et orbi*. He must find some outlet for his feelings, spend money, air his happiness, above all, move. But where could he go in such weather? and besides he had no friends to crush with his success. Diving back into memory, he, however, at last recalled that when poverty had first overtaken him in Paris he had borrowed a small sum—a trifle, twenty francs—from a young man of his own age, named André, who could scarcely have been much richer than himself. Now Paul still had half of the five hundred francs lent him by the old clerk, he could have the thousand francs as soon as he wanted them, so why not pay his debt, and assume vast importance for having done so?

Unfortunately, the young man in question lived a long distance off, in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and Paul was hesitating, when an empty cab drove by. He jumped in, and gave the address to the driver with the air of a man unaccustomed to go on foot. The vehicle at once started off, and on the road Paul recalled what he knew of his creditor. Young André was certainly not a friend of his, barely an acquaintance. Paul had met him at a little establishment on the Boulevard de Clichy, the Café de l'Épinette, where he had often gone with Rose when living at Montmartre, in the earlier days of their sojourn in Paris. The Café de l'Épinette is mainly frequented by young artists, painters, musicians, comedians, and journalists, all great men in embryo, who indulge in furious disputes, and drink enormous quantities of beer. The name of the establishment is due to a piano, installed in a large room upstairs—an unfortunate, ill-used instrument, invariably out of tune, and driving folks with a musical ear quite wild by its discordant notes.

Unacquainted with André's surname, all that Paul knew of him was that he was an artist, with several strings to his bow. In the first place he was an ornamental sculptor—that is to say, he carved the figures, medallions, brackets, garlands, and arabesques, which decorate the outside of most new houses in Paris. The calling is not altogether an agreeable one, for it is often necessary to work at dizzy heights, on scaffoldings which quake at the slightest movement; to trust oneself on narrow planks and slender ladders; to be exposed to every kind of climatic inclemency—broiled in summer, frozen in winter, and sheltered merely by some torn sailcloth from the rain. The only comfort is, that the calling is lucrative, so that André earned a decent livelihood with his wreaths and figures. For many years, however, what he had made by the chisel and the mallet had largely gone in colours and brushes, for he was also a painter, feeling a natural, irresistible vocation for the pictorial branch of art. He had studied, worked under several masters, and at last, feeling strong enough to labour alone, he had taken a small studio of his own. From that moment, painting was not a source of expenditure, but one of profit. His pictures had been twice admitted to the

ial fine art show, orders had reached him from amateurs, and picture-dealers were beginning to inquire after his address. At the Café de l'ÉpINETTE, André was held in high esteem. The men he met there, all young fellows of culture, maintained that he had great talent and wonderful originality, and that some day he would be famous. Paul had sat at the same table with him a score of times, when one evening, sorely pressed for money, he asked him for the loan of twenty francs, promising to return them the next day. But the next day Paul and Rose were even poorer than before, their affairs going hourly from bad to worse; and then they moved and established themselves on the other side of the Seine. In short, for eight months, Paul had not seen André.

The cab drew up at the right number in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. Paul threw a couple of francs to the driver, and entered the large, well kept courtyard. At the further end a fat old woman, fresh, and cleanly looking, wearing a white cap with broad ruffles, was polishing a brass door handle. Plainly enough she must be the concierge. "Monsieur André?" asked Paul.

"He is at home," answered the old woman, with extraordinary volubility; "and I may say, without being indiscreet, that it is a wonderful thing to catch Monsieur André here. He is always out, for you see he has not his equal for hard work."

"But, madame—"

"And, then he is so settled down and so sensible," continued the old woman, "and so economical as well! I don't believe he owes a farthing in the world. On only one occasion have I ever seen him a little the worse for drink. And as for women—well I know of none except one young lady who for a month or so—ah, I have tried to see what she's like, but she always wears a veil. Of course, it's none of my business; but I must say she seems to me very nice and proper. She always has her maid with her; and some day—"

"Wounds!" cried Paul, impatiently, "will you tell me where to find Monsieur André?"

This violent interruption seemed to shock the concierge. "Fourth floor, door on the right," she answered coldly; and while Paul sprang lightly up the stairs, she grumbled: "a young fellow who has been badly brought up! The idea of his taking the words out of my mouth in that way! If you ever come again, my young man, I shall know you as sure as my name's Poileveu, and I doubt if you will find Monsieur André at home!"

Paul was already on the fourth floor, and on the door at the right perceived a visiting card bearing the name, "André." As there was no bell, he knocked, and then listened, as one naturally does in such cases. At once he heard a sound of footsteps, a piece of furniture moved, the rattling of brass rings on an iron rod, and then a clear, youthful voice called out, "Come in!"

Mascarot's protégé opened the door. He found himself in a studio, lighted from above. The room was of good size, simple in its furniture, but exquisitely clean and orderly. Several sketches and drawings, as well as unfinished pictures, hung upon the walls. On the right was a low, broad divan, covered by a Tunisian carpet, while above the mantelshelf stood a large mirror in a carved frame, that would have excited an amateur's cupidity. On the left rose a large easel, but a curtain of green baize covered the picture on it, only its frame being seen.

André himself stood in the centre of the atelier, with his palette on his

thumb, and his brushes in his hand. He was a tall young fellow, admirably built, and very dark, with close cropped hair, and a full, silky, curling black beard. Compared with Paul, André was certainly not handsome. But the young painter had all what was lacking in the face of Mascarot's protégé: his countenance was full of expression, once seen it was not easily forgotten, his brow was broad and proud, his mouth firmly curved, and his frank smile and honest eyes bespoke at once his loyalty, intelligence, goodness of heart and energy.

One singularity immediately struck Paul. André, who had evidently been painting, wore no artist's blouse, but was dressed with extreme care, if not in the latest style. On recognising Paul, the young artist laid down his palette, and came forward with extended hands. "Ah!" said he, "I am glad to see you. I could not imagine what had become of you."

This friendly greeting annoyed and embarrassed Mascarot's protégé. "I have had a thousand disappointments," he began, "a thousand cares—"

"And Rose?" interrupted André; "you bring me good news of her, I hope. Is she as pretty as ever?"

"Just the same," answered Paul, indifferently. "But you must excuse me," he added, "for having vanished so entirely from your view. I come to thank you now, and to return your loan."

The young painter shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "Pshaw!" said he, "you were the only one of us two who could have remembered such a bagatelle. Don't stand on ceremony with me—don't let this give you any inconvenience."

These words displeased Paul. His vanity was offended. He fancied this seeming generosity concealed a desire to humiliate him. However, he had at all events a delightful opportunity of showing his superiority.

"Oh," he answered, conceitedly, "it gives me no possible inconvenience. I was, I admit, very poor at the time you obliged me, but I am now in receipt of a salary of twelve thousand francs."

He thought the artist would be dazzled, and allow some envious exclamation to escape him; but he found himself mistaken, and was obliged to add, "At my age it is very pleasant."

"Magnificent, I should call it. And may I ask, if it is not an indiscretion, what your employment is?"

This question was perfectly natural under the circumstances; but as Paul could not answer it, for he was as yet in utter ignorance of his future duties, it wounded him as if it had been a premeditated insult. "I work!" he answered, straightening himself up.

His manner was so singular that André, a thousand leagues from the truth, could not conceal his surprise. "As for myself," he answered, "it seldom happens that I remain idle."

"No doubt," rejoined Paul, "but I am obliged to exert myself more than you, as I have no one to interest himself in my future, neither friend nor protector!" The ungrateful fellow had forgotten Mascarot.

His words seemed to furnish André considerable amusement. "Protectors!" quoth he. "Do you imagine that the State provides foundlings with protection?"

Paul looked amazed. "What!" he asked, "are you—"

"A foundling? Yes. And I make no mystery of it. For though it might give me occasion to weep, it surely has never made me blush. All my comrades know that such is the case, and I am surprised you are ignorant of it. I am simply a foundling from the Vendôme hospital,

where, by the way, I must have left the reputation of being a little good-for-nothing."

"You?" . . .

"Yes, I; and frankly I don't feel the least remorse. But to explain myself. Until I was twelve years old I was the happiest of children, for my teachers were pleased with me. I worked all day in the garden along the Loire, and in the evening I wasted a vast amount of paper, for even then I had determined to be an artist. But there is nothing lasting in the world, and one day the Superior took it into her head to apprentice me to a tanner."

Paul was seated on the divan, and as he listened, he rolled a cigarette. He was about to light it, when André hastily exclaimed, "I beg your pardon, but you will oblige me by not smoking here."

Without asking the reason for this request, for the painter was an incessant smoker himself, Paul tossed his match aside. "All right," said he; "but pray go on with your story."

"Oh! willingly; it is not very long. This trade of a tanner was disagreeable to me from the first moment; and on the second day an awkward workman upset a kettle of boiling water, which scalded me so cruelly that I still bear the marks." As he spoke, he turned up his right sleeve and showed a large scar extending from his elbow to his shoulder. "Disgusted and scalded, I implored the Superior, a terrible woman with spectacles, to apprentice me to some other trade; but my entreaties were useless. She had sworn that I should be a tanner!"

"That was hard."

"Harder than you think! However, from that day my mind was made up. I determined to run away as soon as I had saved a trifle, and accordingly I became a most industrious and attentive apprentice. At the end of a year, thanks to prodigies of economy and industry on my part, I had saved up some forty francs. I decided this would do; and so, one fine April morning, furnished with a shirt, a blouse, and a pair of shoes in a bundle, I started on foot for Paris—"

"And you were only thirteen?"

"Not quite thirteen. Fortunately, I had received from Heaven a fair dose of will, such as some persons call head-strong folly. I had sworn that I would be a painter—"

"And you have succeeded in becoming one."

"Not without infinite difficulty. Ah! I can see now the inn where I slept that first night I arrived in Paris. It was at the top of the Faubourg St. Jacques. I was so worn out, that I slept fifteen hours on the stretch. When I woke up I ordered a good breakfast; and then, seeing that my funds were very low, I said to myself, 'To work, my boy, to work!'"

Paul smiled. He remembered his first days in Paris, his troubles and disappointments. And yet he had been far more fortunately circumstanced than André. The latter was then but thirteen, and had only forty francs in his purse, whereas he, Paul, had already reached manhood and could near a hundred and fifty gold napoleons jingling in his pockets.

"You wished to find some employment?" asked Mascarot's protégé.

"Yes, and something more. I said to myself, that to know anything I must learn it thoroughly, and if I passionately longed to make money it was to enable me to pursue my studies. Fortunately, while I was eating, I noticed a stout man sitting near me, who was breakfasting as well. 'See,

st,' said I, 'look at me. I am only thirteen, but I am much stronger than my years; I can read and write; I am not afraid of work. What shall I do to earn my living?'"

He looked at me from head to foot, and then in a rough voice said, "Go, to-morrow morning, to the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, where the masons meet to be hired. You'll perhaps find some master-mason who'll engage you."

"And you went?"

"Yes, fortunately for me. At four o'clock the next morning I was wandering among the groups of workmen, when suddenly I saw my stout friend of the day before. He came towards me at once. 'Boy,' he said, 'you please me. I am a contractor for ornamental sculpture; will you be my apprentice?' To learn sculpture—I thought Heaven was opening before me! 'Certainly I will,' said I. No sooner said than done. This worthy man was Jean Lantier, the father of my present master."

"But your painting?"

"Oh, that came much later. As I wished to obtain a certain education, studied in all my leisure time. I went to school in the evening regularly, learnt drawing properly. I bought books, and on Sundays I even employed a teacher for myself alone."

"Out of your economies?"

"Precisely; and it was a long time before I ventured to indulge myself with a glass of beer. 'Six sous,' I said to myself; 'put it by, André.' However, at last, the day came when I made my eighty or hundred francs a week, and then I ventured to indulge in painting."

"And you have never thought of returning to Vendôme?"

"Yes I have often thought of it, but I sha'n't do so until I'm in a position to furnish a sum of money to bring up some poor abandoned youngster like myself."

If André had purposely wished to wound and mortify Paul, he could not have expressed himself differently. Each of his words was full of bitterness for Mascaret's protégé, who, albeit, realised that in mere politeness he must make some complimentary remark. After an effort, therefore, he exclaimed, "With such talent as your's, success becomes a certainty."

Then, as if seeking for confirmation of his opinion, he rose, and apparently examined the sketches on the wall. In reality, however, he was strongly attracted by the heavily-framed picture, so carefully screened by the green baize curtain on the easel before him. While André had proceeded with his narrative, Paul, annoyed as he was, found his thoughts turn with strange persistency to this painting. He remembered the indiscreet babble of Madame Poilleveu, the old concierge, on the subject of a thickly veiled young lady, who, accompanied by her maid, was in the habit of visiting the painter. Besides, when he had knocked at the door on his arrival, he had only been tardily admitted. Had he not heard the easel moved and the curtain drawn? And then why was André so carefully dressed? why had he asked him not to smoke? Judging by all this, Paul decided that André was in momentary expectation of the lady's arrival, and that the portrait was unquestionably her likeness. He therefore determined to see it, whether André gave his consent or not. Consequently, as he went around the room admiring each sketch and study, with ohs! and ahs! of approval, he manoeuvred so as to approach the easel in a gradual, natural style. Reaching it at last he paused abruptly, and point-

king with his hand, exclaimed, "And this—what is it? The pearl of your studio, I presume."

But André, although naturally unsuspicious, was by no means dull of apprehension. He had divined Paul's intentions. Wounded deeply by what he considered a want of delicacy, he said nothing, thinking he might after all be mistaken, but he watched. At the very moment therefore, when Paul stretched out his arm, André did the same, and even more swiftly, so as to interpose between the easel and his visitor. "If I conceal this picture," said he, "it is because I do not wish it to be seen!"

"Oh, indeed! excuse me," replied Paul, trying to laugh off his indiscretion; but in reality he was highly displeased at the tone the artist had assumed, mentally deciding that it was excessively absurd. "All right," he said to himself. "As such is the case, I will prolong my visit and see the original since I am not allowed to look at her portrait!"

Thereupon, with amiable determination, he ensconced himself in a large arm-chair near the artist's table, and began a long story, resolved to take no notice of any of André's significant gestures, or of the fact that he constantly drew out his watch to see what time it was. Still did Paul talk on, growing more and more animated, till at last he chanced to copy, almost under his hand, a young woman's photograph. Taking advantage of André's preoccupation, he was able to take hold of it and give it a good look before remarking, "By Jove! what a pretty girl!"

At this remark André flushed scarlet, and rapidly advancing, he snatched the print from Paul's hands and slipped it between the leaves of a book. His anger was so evident that Mascarot's protégé turned pale and rose to his feet. For a minute or more the two young men looked silently into each other's eyes, measuring each other as mortal enemies might have done. They hardly knew each other. The same chance which had brought them together might again separate them for ever, and yet each vaguely felt that the other exercised some decisive influence over his life.

André recovered himself first. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I was wrong to leave things which should be carefully put away lying about. Paul was already bowing with the air of a man who accepts an apology, when the painter added, "I rarely receive any one except my friends. To-day I have made an exception to my rule—"

With a lofty gesture Paul interrupted André. "Believe me, sir," said he, in a tone which he did his best to make wounding and insulting—"believe me, sir, but for the imperative duty you know of, I should never have intruded on you." So saying he turned on his heels and left the room, changing the door behind him.

"But! Are those your manners?" muttered André. "Well, good riddance to bad rubbish. In any case, I should have been obliged to show you the door."

As for Paul, he left the studio in a furious rage. He had come there with the kind intention of humiliating an obliging acquaintance by the display of his prosperity, but he withdrew crushed and mortified. He could not help comparing himself with this young fellow, so self-reliant yet so modest, and saw himself as he really was—petty, all but ridiculous. He hated André for all the noble qualities he was forced to recognise in him. "However," he muttered, "he shan't have his own way—I'll see his beauty after all;" and without considering how base his conduct was, he crossed the street and placed himself so as to have a full view of the house where André resided. It was exceedingly cold, and he shivered; but certain minds

often exhibit in the satisfaction of a revengeance & tenacity they fail to apply to more important matters. He had waited a good half hour, when suddenly a cab drew up at the door of the house he was watching. Two women alighted, one of them, young with a most distinguished air, the other clad like a lady's maid in an aristocratic family.

Paul approached them without the least hesitation, and although the younger woman wore a thick veil, he was easily able to recognise her as the original of the photograph he had seen in André's room. "Ah, well!" he said frankly, "I prefer Rose; and the proof is, that I am going at once to find her. We will pay Mother Loupias, and leave that abominable Hôtel du Pérou, for good."

VIII.

B. MASCAROT'S protégé was not the only person who had been playing the spy. On hearing the cab wheels, Madame Poileveu, albeit the most discreet of concierges, advanced to the threshold and fixed both eyes on the young lady. As the latter entered with her maid, Madame Poileveu had an inspiration. She advanced into the street and spoke to the driver.

"Bad weather," said she "I don't envy you your seat in winter time."

"Don't speak of it," answered the man; "my feet are quite frozen."

"Your two fares have perhaps come some long distance."

"I should say so, indeed! I took them up in the Champs Elysées, near the Avenue de Matignon."

"Is it possible!"

"Yes, and only four sous gratuity. Ain't it disgusting? Heaven preserve me from respectable women!"

"Ah! respectable, are they?"

"Oh, yes, I'll answer for them. The others are more generous by far. I know both sets." At the same moment, delighted to have given this proof of his penetration, he whipped up his horse and drove away.

The concierge regained her quarters, only half pleased. "However," she muttered, "I at least know what neighbourhood the damsel lives in. The next time I will offer something to the maid, and she will tell me everything."

But this hope was a false one, for the maid in question was absolutely devoted to her mistress. She was indeed by no means pleased with the persistent glances the concierge gave her on each occasion; and as she climbed the stairs, she bitterly complained to her mistress of what she called the "creature's insolence." "She would certainly complain," she said, "to Monsieur André, and he would soon put a stop to the woman's impertinence."

But the mere idea of any complaint startled the young lady, who, turning towards her maid, firmly responded, "No, Modeste, do not open your lips to André on the subject."

"But, mademoiselle—"

"Hush! Remember what I say, and obey me. Come, we must make haste, for he is waiting."

Yes, he was waiting in all that delicious agony of suspense known only at earlier manhood. After Paul's departure, André had been unable to sit still; it seemed to him that each second was an eternity. He had opened the door of his studio, and at each time he heard the slightest noise he ran

to the stairs. At last he really heard her; a harmony like that of the celestial spheres was the rustling of the loved one's robe. Leaning over the bannisters, he caught a glimpse of her. Yes, it was she; she had reached the second floor—now the third—and at last she entered his studio, the door of which he closed behind her.

"Good evening, André," she said, offering her hand; "you see that I am punctual."

Pale with emotion and trembling like a leaf, André took hold of the little hand and pressed it respectfully to his lips, as he stammered: "Mademoiselle Sabine, oh! how good of you. Thanks!"

It was indeed Sabine, the only descendant of the old powerful house of De Mussidan, who had come to see André, the foundling of the Vendôme Hospital. It was Sabine, the maiden naturally reserved and timid, taught to respect all social conventionalities, who thus risked what was most precious to her in the world—her honour and reputation. It was she who, despite all the prejudices of her education and race, thus came from the Rue de Matignon, to the distant studio in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. Reason finds no excuse for such daring conduct, but the heart easily explains it.

For more than two years Sabine and André had loved each other. They had met for the first time at the Château de Mussidan, brought together by a succession of trifling incidents, which set at defiance all the precautions of human prudence. Man conceives and combines project after project, but above him rules Providence—fools say chance; and the far-seeing eye and omnipotent hand of the Almighty order everything for the accomplishment of His impenetrable designs.

At the end of the summer of 1865, André, whose constant application to work had somewhat injured his health, was thinking of travelling, when, one evening, his master, Jean Lautier, sent for him. "If you would like comparative rest," said he, "and at the same time make some three or four hundred francs, now's your chance. An architect asks me for a sculptor to execute something in the country—in a superb place, with magnificent scenery all about. Would you like to undertake the work?"

The proposal was so acceptable to André, that by the end of the week he was on his way, with the prospect of a month's absence from the turmoil of Paris. On his arrival at Mussidan, he made an examination of the work intrusted to him, and saw that he could accomplish it with perfect ease. It was simply to restore some ornaments over a balcony which had been recently repaired. The whole could be completed in a fortnight. However, he did not hurry. The surrounding country delighted him; he made a number of charming watercolour sketches; and with open air and sunshine his health speedily returned. There was yet another reason why he made no haste—but this reason he dared not acknowledge even to himself. In the park he had caught a glimpse of a young girl whose eyes, as she glanced at him, had filled his heart with a new and delightful emotion. Now, this young girl was Sabine.

At midsummer the count had started for Germany, the countess had taken refuge at Luchon, and between them they had decided the wisest thing to do was to send their daughter to the old family mansion, under the protection of an aged relative, Madame de Chevauché. The story of these two young people, André and Sabine, was that of all those who have been truly young, and who have loved with sincerity. They exchanged a word or two one morning, and the next day Sabine went out on the balcony.

to see André at work, taking a childish pleasure in watching him as he carved the hard stone. Although more disturbed than he had ever before been in his life, André made so bold as to speak to her. They talked indeed for a long time, and she was astonished by the culture of this young man, who, in his loose white blouse and broad-brimmed hat, had seemed to her a simple mechanic. Ignorant and inexperienced, Sabine was incapable of analyzing her new sensations. André was less able to make a mistake; and one evening, after a severe examination of himself, he was obliged to confess the truth. "I am in love with her," he murmured—"it is unfortunately too true." Then as a ray of common sense showed him the full extent of his folly and presumption, and he realized the barrier separating him from this young girl of noble birth and immense wealth, he was overwhelmed with consternation. "I must leave," he said to himself. "I must take myself off—and in all speed, without once looking round. No good can happen to me here." He said this in all possible good faith as others would have done in his place; he thoroughly made up his mind—and yet, after all, finding his heart fail him at the decisive moment, he deferred his departure and remained.

It seemed, truly enough, as if fate were in his favour. The Château de Mussidan is situated in a most secluded district. To reach the nearest village it was necessary to pass through part of the forest; and so, on André's arrival, it was decided he should take his meals at the château. He took them alone at the hours he pleased in the grand dining-room, waited on by an old servant of the house; but after a short time this isolation struck Sabine as a great inconvenience and a needless humiliation. "Why doesn't M. André take his meals with us?" she asked her aunt. "He is certainly much better bred than many of the persons you receive, and he would amuse you."

The old lady adopted the suggestion. Of course it seemed to her a most extraordinary thing to admit a young man who had been chiselling stones all day long to her table. But then she was really so connuied. Invited on the impulse of the moment, André as impulsively accepted; and the old lady imagined her eyes deceived her when, at dinner-time, she was confronted by a guest who was not merely dressed like a gentleman, but showed remarkable ease of manner and good breeding. "It is incredible," she said to her niece, as she was making her preparations for the night, "absolutely incredible, that a mere stone-cutter should have the air of a grand seigneur! But the end of all things has come, it seems to me—there are no longer any distinctions of rank. I can only see utter confusion; we are marching rapidly toward chaos, and it is quite time I should die."

Notwithstanding all her prejudices, André found his way into the old lady's good graces, and finally completed his conquest by painting a portrait of her, which, while it flattered her prodigiously, was nevertheless a very fair likeness. From that moment he was received on the most cordial footing; and no longer fearing a rebuff, he showed himself both clever and original in conversation. On one occasion he related to Madame de Chevauché the story of his life as simply as he had told it to Paul, but with more details. Sabine was deeply interested in the narrative, wonder-struck by the heroism and endurance he had shown as a child, and by the development of the qualities which had finally won for him comparative success. She admired his courage and perseverance. He seemed to her one of these superior beings whom young girls dream about. In a word she learnt to love him, and dared to acknowledge it to herself. And why not? Their

destinies, far apart as they seemed, had certain points of resemblance. With a father and mother who held "homo" in equal horror, Sabine was well nigh as abandoned as André!

Their days now passed rapidly away. Forgotten by the whole world, apparently sequestered in this isolated château, they were free as the summer breezes; for Madame de Chevauché never troubled them. Regularly after breakfast the old lady begged André to read her the *Gazette*, and regularly, also, between the twentieth and thirtieth lines, she sank into a sleep which no one ever dared to disturb. The two young people slipped away on tiptoe, gaily laughing like truants from school; and they wandered through the wide avenues of the park, in the shade of the ancient oaks, or else in the full sunlight skirted the russet-hued rocks of Rivron. At times on board an old worm-eaten boat, which André contrived to utilise, they drifted down the little river, past the creepers and iris and among the reeds and water-lilies.

Two months thus slipped away—two entire months of enchantment—two months of intoxication and love, although the word, love, never once leaped from their hearts to their lips. After having long fought against a passion from which he could see no happy issue, André had ended by casting reflection aside. He refused to think of the future, in the same way that a consumptive refuses to think of her malady. He vaguely anticipated some great calamity which would separate them, but while awaiting it, each night he thanked God on bended knees that He had granted him another day of happiness. "No," he said to himself, "it cannot last, I am too happy;" and he was right.

Anxious to justify his lingering at Mussidan, André, after completing the task that had brought him there, decided to add to the decorations of the house a *chef-d'œuvre* of modern art. He determined to throw over the stone of the old balcony a garland of leaves and flowers—clematis and creeping virginia blended, so to say, in one. Each day, while everyone else was yet sound asleep, his task advanced. One morning while he was on the balcony occupied with the creepers, the old valet who usually waited on him came to say that Madame de Chevauché wished to speak to him. "She begged me to hurry you, sir, saying it was a matter of importance."

The young artist had a presentiment of impending misfortune. He divined that his dream of bliss was over, and followed the old servant with the uncertain, hesitating steps of a condemned man. As they paused in front of the drawing-room where Sabine's aunt was waiting, the valet whispered, "Take care, sir, take care! Madame is in such a state of mind. I never have seen her like it since the day my master died."

The old lady was indeed in a terrible temper; and, despite her rheumatism, was walking up and down the room, her high cap askew, gesticulating and rapping on the floor with her tall cane. When André appeared, she paused abruptly, throw back her head with a haughty gesture, and in a loud, masculine-like voice—such as women of the old aristocracy keep in reserve for special occasions—began, "Ah, ah! my fine fellow! you have had the impudence, I am told, to make love to my niece!"

She addressed him precisely as she might have spoken to a farm servant, thinking, no doubt, that she would thus awaken in him a more vivid sense of the enormity of his offence. Pale as André had previously been, he now flushed scarlet. "Madame!" he stammered.

"Good heavens! man, do you intend to deny what I say, when your very face tells the truth?" cried the angry old lady. "Do you know you

are an impudent knave, to presume to lift your eyes to Sabine de Mussidan ? How can you have been so audacious ? Because I was over kind to you, I suppose. Did you mean to seduce her, or did you think of asking for her hand in marriage ?”

“I swear to you, madame. Upon my honour—”

“Upon your honour ? To hear you, one would suppose you were a born nobleman. If my husband had been alive, he would have broken every bone in your body ; but I must simply content myself with ordering you from the premises. Get your tools together, my man, and be off !”

André did not move. He stood as if turned to stone. Sensitive as he usually was, he now hardly noticed the indignity with which he was treated—he only realized that he should never see Sabine again ; and as the full force of this misfortune swept over him, he turned deadly pale and staggered to a chair. His manner was so unexpected, his bitter grief so apparent, that the old lady seemed actually touched, and resumed in a softer tone, “I have, perhaps, been very severe with you, sir ; but I am, unfortunately, very quick-tempered. This lamentable affair is my fault in a very great degree. As the Curé of Bivron told me early this morning, I am so old that I had forgotten how young people were likely to conduct themselves when left alone. I was the only one it seems who was ignorant of your goings on ; for the whole district has been chattering about you and my niece.”

André started to his feet with so threatening a gesture, that had the six hundred inhabitants of Bivron seen him, they would certainly have fled in terror. “Ah !” cried he, “if I only had the wretches by the throat !”

“Good !” exclaimed Madame de Chevauché, by no means displeased with this energetic language. “Good ! but you can hardly expect to cut out every malicious tongue. Fortunately, the harm is so far not irreparable ; so go away and forget my niece.”

“Go away and forget !”—she might as well have bid André destroy himself. “Madame,” he began, in a despairing tone, “pray listen to me. I am young, and full of courage and hope !”

His despair was so intense, his voice so heart-broken, that the old lady positively pitied him. “What is the use of saying that to me ?” she asked. “Sabine is not my child. All that I can do is never to mention this matter to my niece’s father and mother. Good heavens ! if Mussidan only knew it, what a stir he would make ! Come, now, go away ! You have made me ill, and I don’t believe I shall eat a mouthful for the next two days.”

André left the room, supporting himself against the wall. The floor seemed to heave and roll like a ship’s deck in a gale. His mind was whirling too, and he could barely see where he was going. In the hall, however, he realised that some one grasped his hand ; and after a vigorous effort to collect his thoughts, he perceived Sabine, pale and statue-like, beside him. “I have heard everything, André, everything,” said she. •

“Yes,” he stammered. “It is all over ; I am driven away.”

“Where are you going ?”

“God only knows ! I do not care.”

Sabine laid her hand on his arm. “You are desperate,” she whispered.

He looked at her with eyes that terrified her, and answered, in a husky voice, “Desperate, indeed !”

Never had Sabine been so lovely. Her eyes sparkled with generous determination, her expression was sublime. “But, supposing,” said she, “supposing I showed you some gleam of future hope, what would you do then ?”

"What would I do?" cried André, with delirious exultation. "Why, everything in the power of man. Let obstacles be multiplied around us, I would dash them aside. No matter how difficult the conditions imposed upon me, I would fulfil them. If a fortune is wanted, I will make it—a name, I will win it!"

"You have forgotten one thing that is needed—patience."

"Ah! mademoiselle, I have that too. Don't you understand, that with one word from you I can live on hope?"

Sabine raised her right hand, as if calling on heaven to hear her. "Work," she said, "work and hope, André; for I swear before God that I will be your wife, or die unmarried. If there must be a contest, then—"

A loud noise at the end of the hall interrupted her. Old Madame de Chevauché was rapping on the door with her cane. "Still here!" she cried in a ringing voice.

André turned and fled. His heart was beating wildly. Ah! now he had a hope which would enable him to bear all trials without a murmur. What happened after his departure between Madame de Chevauché and her niece? The servants remarked that, after a long conference together, they both had red and swollen eyes. It is possible that Sabine coaxed the old lady round to her way of thinking: for two months later, when Madame de Chevauché died, she bequeathed everything she possessed directly to Sabine, her will being so drawn up that Mademoiselle de Mussidan was to receive the revenues as long as she remained single, and the entire capital on the day of her marriage, "with or without her parents' consent." This clause made Sabine's mother remark, "Our poor aunt lost her mind at last."

No, she had not lost her mind. Sabine and André understood her perfectly, and sincerely mourned the excellent woman, whose last desire was to smooth their path.

They were then both in Paris, André hard at work, Sabine true to her promises. In Paris she was even more mistress of her time and actions than when at Mussidan. She was guarded only by her faithful maid, Modeste, who was absolutely devoted to her. Thus after corresponding with André, she had at last granted him several interviews, and finally, yielding to his entreaties, she had consented to visit him at his studio, always accompanied, be it understood, by Modeste. And here, it may be added, that never a sovereign, visiting her devoted subjects, never a madonna borne in procession through a crowd of worshippers, was the object of more respectful adoration, than that offered to Sabine in the artist's humble home.

IX.

Of course, Mademoiselle de Mussidan had absolute certainty of being treated with boundless respect before she decided to visit André.

When she entered his modest studio, pervaded as it was with thoughts of her, she seemed to breathe the incense that had burned in her honour. She was so calm and self-possessed, that no one would have imagined she was conscious of having ventured on the most hazardous step a young girl can possibly take. After giving André her hand, she slowly took off her bonnet, handed it to Modeste, and then inquired, "How do I look, my friend?"

The artist's passionate answer made her smile, and she gaily added, "I meant to say, am I as I ought to be for my portrait?"

Sabine was beautiful; but to compare her beauty with Rose's as Paul had done, was foolish in the extreme. Rose's beauty was of the kind that take the senses captive, and wins the light admiration of a libertine; Sabine's was of a different character, refined and idealized. Rose chained the body to this earth; Sabine raised the soul heavenwards. To judge Mademoiselle de Mussidan it was necessary to know her, to be worthy of her so to say. There was nothing dazzling about her chaste beauty. An expression of placid resignation, somewhat mingled with reserve, greatly attenuated the impression she was likely to cause on a superficial observer. She could have passed unnoticed, like some forgotten Raphael, coated with dust, and hanging in an obscure village church. But when attention was once really attracted, no one could tire of admiring her broad brow, with its crown of braided chestnut hair; her large soft eyes, her exquisitely curved lips, and her transparent complexion. She had adopted for her portrait a coiffure, long out of fashion, but which suited her wonderfully; and it was in connection with this coiffure that she had asked, "How do I look?"

"Alas!" said André, "when I see you, I realize all my lack of skill. An hour ago, I said to myself, the portrait is finished! But now, I can't conceal the truth, my work is most imperfect."

He had drawn aside the bajze curtain, and Sabine's portrait stood with the light full upon it. It was by no means a work of extraordinary merit. André was but twenty-four, and while studying, he had been compelled to toil for his daily bread. Still the picture was not wanting in originality; and although lack of experience was apparent, here and there there was a certain charm even about its very faults. Sabine stood for a moment looking at it in silence, and then in a tone of sincere conviction said, "It is beautiful."

The young painter was too discouraged to accept this praise. "No doubt it is not unlike you," he replied, slowly; "but the photograph you gave me was an excellent likeness, better even than this. I have achieved but a sorry result, for I have been unable to impart the least reflection of your inner self. It is but a superficial sketch. However, I will try again, and then—"

Sabine interrupted him with a gesture of denial. "You will not try again," she said, in a sweet but firm voice.

"Why not?" he asked in surprise.

"Because, my dear friend, this visit will be my last."

"The last," stammered André. "What have I done that you should punish me so cruelly?"

"I am not punishing you, André," answered Sabine. "You desired my portrait; I yielded to your entreaties, and do not regret having done so. But listen, now, to the voice of reason. Don't you understand that I have no right to trifle in this way with my reputation? Have you thought what the world would say if it ever became known that I have come here like this, day after day?"

He did not reply: he was trying to recover from this heavy blow. "Besides," resumed Mademoiselle de Mussidan, "what is the use of a picture that must be hidden like a bad action? Do you forget that our future—our marriage depend on your rapid success?"

"No, surely I don't forget it."

"Then hasten your endeavours André. It is not enough for me to say my choice is not an ordinary one—you must prove the truth of my words by your works."

"And I will do so!"

"So I believe, dear friend. But remember what I said a year ago: 'Become celebrated, and then go to the Comte de Mussidan, my father, and ask him for his daughter's hand. If he refuse—if my prayers do not move him—I will leave his house on your arm.'"

"You are right!" replied André. "Let us leave the portrait on one side: I should be a fool to sacrifice a future life of happiness for a brief space of present joy. To hear you, moreover, is to obey."

Mademoiselle de Mussidan reclined in the great arm-chair; André drew forward a carved oak stool, and in his turn sat down. "Now," resumed Sabine, "as we agree so well, let us discuss our common interests, for it seems to me we have been neglecting them."

These common interests simply resolved themselves into the question of André's success, and ~~he~~at once began to relate what had happened since their last meeting: "I am really embarrassed," he began. "The day before yesterday Prince Croscenzi, the celebrated amateur, came to visit my studio. One of my sketches pleased him, and he ordered a picture, agreeing to pay me six thousand francs."

"But that is a great stroke of luck!"

"To be sure: but, unfortunately, he wants it at once. Then, again, Jean Lantier, overwhelmed with work, offers to transfer to me the ornamentation of a large house in the Champs Elysées, which he is building for a contractor, M. Gandelu. He proposes I should engage the necessary workmen, superintend the whole affair, and thus net some seven or eight thousand francs profit."

"But how are you embarrassed?"

"Let me explain. I have seen M. Gandelu twice: he wishes me to begin at once. Now, I can't undertake both of these enterprises. I must decide between them."

Sabine thought for a moment. "I should do the picture," said she.

"And I should agree with you, if it were not for—"

The young girl knew her lover well enough to divine the cause of his hesitation. "Ah!" she murmured, "Will you never love me well enough to forget that I am rich? Our plans would quickly have a good result if you would only consent—"

André turned pale. "Ah!" cried he, "do you wish to poison our love?"

She sighed, but did not insist. "Well," she said, "let it be as you desire. Leave the prince's picture on one side, and make arrangements to proceed with M. Gandelu's work."

It was now striking five o'clock, and Sabine rose. "Before leaving, my friend," said she, "I ought to inform you of an annoying matter. There has been some talk of marrying me to Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay."

"The millionaire who keeps a racing stable?"

"Precisely. If I resisted my father's desires, an explanation would be necessary, and I am by no means desirous of one just now. I therefore propose speaking frankly to Monsieur de Breulh. I know him; he is an honest and straightforward man, and will withdraw. What do you think of this plan?"

"Alas!" exclaimed André, "I think that if he withdraws, it will be only to make room for some one else."

"Very likely, and then we will dismiss his successor in his turn. Ought I not to have my share of difficulties?"

But the prospect frightened the unhappy lover. "What a life yours will be," he murmured. "You may have to wage daily war with your family."

She looked at him proudly as she answered, "Do you doubt me?"

Sabine was now ready to leave, and André wished to go and fetch her a vehicle; but she refused, saying that Modeste and she were not afraid of walking, even if they did not succeed in finding a cab on their way. As she took her leave, she added, "I shall see M. de Breulh to-morrow, and will write to you at once."

André remained alone. It seemed to him at first as if part of his life had left him with Sabine. However, his depression did not last long. A happy inspiration came to him. "She went away on foot," he reflected, "I may yet see her for some minutes. I can surely follow her at a distance without compromising her."

Ten seconds later he was in the street. It was growing dark, and yet on glancing down the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne he could still perceive Sabine and her maid. They were walking fast, but he had soon covered the intervening ground, and ten paces in the rear, followed them along the Rue de Laval and the Rue de Douai. He made no attempt to apprise them of his presence but walked on, admiring Sabine's dainty walk and distinguished air, and the charming manner in which she held her dress aside without unduly raising it. "And to think," he murmured, "to think that the day may come when I shall have the right of walking beside her. Her arm will rest on mine." The thought thrilled him like an electric battery.

In the meanwhile, Sabine and Modeste had reached the Rue Blanche, where finding a cab, they hailed it and got in. The vehicle was already some distance off, and yet André lingered on the curbstone following it in fancy. However, he could not stand there for ever; and at last, mustering up his courage, he turned round, intending to regain his studio. He was half way along the Rue de Douai when, just as he passed in front of a brilliantly illuminated shop, he heard a gay young voice call him by name, "Monsieur André! Monsieur André!"

He looked up in bewilderment. Like a man just awakened. Before him, near a smart looking brougham drawn by two fine horses, stood a young woman, in a most conspicuous costume, who was making a friendly sign to him. He racked his memory to recognize her. "I am not mistaken," he said, at last; "Mademoiselle Rose, I fancy?"

"Say Madame Zora de Chantemille, if you please," exclaimed a falsetto voice in the rear.

André turned, and found himself confronted by a young man who had just been giving some orders to the coachman. "Ah!" said he, starting back.

"Yes," resumed the young fellow. "Chantemille is the name of an estate I intend giving to madame as soon as my father is dead."

It was with some little surprise that the painter examined this liberal minded young spark, noting in turn his ridiculously short coat, his low broad brimmed hat, his tight trousers which showed his knock-knees to advantage, his huge watch chain and locket, his eye glass and his red gloves. He certainly looked ridiculous; and Toto-Chupin had not exaggerated in likening him to a monkey.

"Pshaw!" cried Rose, "what difference does a name make? The important thing is to persuade this gentleman, who is a friend of mine, to come home and dine with us!" and without awaiting a reply, she gaily but roughly pushed André into a brilliantly lighted vestibule.

"Pon my word," cried the young swell, "'pon my word, I call that rather stiff! However, our friend's friends are *our* friends, no doubt. Indeed, of course they are."

André, who was quite disconcerted by this unlooked for onslaught, tried to excuse himself, but Rose, anxious to show her new-born power, placed herself on the doorstep, and repeated again and again, "You must dine with us; I insist on it. You shall dine with us; you must, you shall!"

Then, as she prided herself on her good manners, she took in her own Gandelu's and André's right hand. "Monsieur André," said she, "I must introduce to you M. Gaston de Gandelu. M. de Gandelu—M. André, the artist."

The two young men bowed. "André!" said Gandelu. "I have heard the name before; and the face is familiar—ah, yes! I have it; it was at my father's. Are you not, sir, in charge of the sculpture on his new house? Then you belong to us. We inaugurate Zora's new apartment to-night! Lots of fun you know. And the more we are, of course the merrier."

André still resisted. "I cannot accept," he said; "I have an important engagement."

"Well, break it then. You are here, and we mean to keep you."

André hesitated. He was out of spirits, and felt a strong desire to escape from himself. "After all," he thought, "why should I decline? If this young man's friends are like himself, I shall not lack amusement."

"Come," said Rose, hastening to the stairs, "it's decided." André was about to follow her, when Gandelu held him back, whispering with a delighted air, "Was there ever such a woman! and wait a bit, you don't know her yet. Let me form her a little. I haven't my equal for starting a woman you know. Just you ask Auguste at the Café Riche. He'll tell you that I'm A 1."

"That is easily seen," replied André, seriously.

"To be sure! First, you see, I understand business. I'm straight, and square, and fair—Zora—a fine name, don't you think so? I chose it. Zora is not very swell to-night, but only wait a bit and you'll see. This afternoon I ordered six dresses for her—six dresses from Van Klopen. You know him of course?"

"Not in the least."

"What! is that really so? You amaze me. Van Klopen, my dear fellow, is a dressmaker—a man dressmaker. He is an Alsatian, without his equal. Such taste! such invention! such *chic*!"

Reaching her apartment by this time, Rose called impatiently, "Are you never coming?"

"Quick!" said Gandelu to André; "let us go up at once." When she is angry, she has terrible nervous attacks. She won't own it, but I know that such is the case. There's no deceiving me. I'm well acquainted with women's natures."

Rose and Paul were not fitted to understand each other; they were far too much alike. If the new lady of Chantemille had so particularly insisted on retaining André to dinner, it was because she wished to dazzle him with her magnificence. As a beginning, she exhibited her two servants, her cook and her maid—and then André had to visit each room, and admire each

article of furniture. He had to fall into ecstasies on beholding the everlasting and horrible buttercup and blue hangings of the drawing-room; was compelled to feel how thick and glossy the stuffs were, and how admirably the lounges were padded. Gandelu triumphantly opened the march, holding aloft a huge candelabrum, the eight candles of which besprinkled him with wax. He extolled the exquisite taste of everything, and invariably chronicled the price in the tone of an appraiser. His chatter was most disjointed, and André had no little difficulty in following it. "This clock," the young swell said, "cost a hundred louis—a mere nothing, you understand. It is so singular that you should know my father. Hasn't he a clear head? That jardinière cost three hundred francs, one might as well say nothing. Be very careful with my father, he is extremely cunning. He was determined on my becoming a working man, but I would rather have died. No, that was by no means dear, that table; it only cost twenty louis. At first, you see, I did not know that he was in bad health, but the physicians now say that in six months—" He paused, for at this moment a loud noise was heard in the ante-room. "Here come my guests!" he cried, and placing the candelabrum on the table, he hurried out of the room.

André was supremely astonished. He had heard speak of these young swells, the delight of the Boulevard and the turf, but he had so far never mingled in their society. His look of stupefaction must have flattered Rose. "As you see," she said, "I have left Paul. To begin with, he wearied me inexpressibly, and at last he hadn't a sou to buy me bread."

"He! you are jesting; for to-day he came to my rooms, and told me that he was making twelve thousand francs a year."

"Twelve thousand falsehoods! Unless—well, at all events, I can only say that a fellow who accepts five hundred francs from people he does not know—" She stopped short, but signed to André that she had a great deal more to tell him.

Young Gandelu was now entering the room with his friends, whom he duly introduced. "My lads," said he, "The whole spread comes from Potel's. We'll have some fun, and by-and-bye a little gambling, just for the sake of our healths."

The guests seemed fully as ridiculous as the host; and André was beginning to congratulate himself on having come, when a servant, with a white choker, threw open the door of the salon and announced, "Madame la Vicountesse is served!"

X.

WHENEVER B. Mascarot was asked what was the chief condition of success, he invariably replied, "Activity—activity—activity." He had, it must he admitted, one great superiority over most men—he put into practice the maxims he professed; and so we need not be surprised if on the morrow of his expedition to the Hôtel de Mussidan, he was already in his office and at work, at seven o'clock in the morning. Although a thick fog lay over the city, and little if anything could be distinguished out of doors, the outer office was already thronged with clients. But the honourable agent did not trouble himself about these matutinal visitors, mostly composed of cook-shop servants, who after purchasing their daily provisions at the Central Markets hard by, dropped in on the chance, perhaps, that handsome M. Beaumarchef might have some better situation for them. Experience had

taught Mascarot that servants of this class, who seldom leave their kitchens, knew but little of what transpired in the eating-houses where they were employed, or even if they did know anything, it was not of the slightest value to him. Mascarot, therefore, relinquished these early applicants to Beaumarchef, and only disturbed himself when by chance he recognized, through the glass window, some face he was familiar with, that of a *maitre d'hôtel* or butler in some noble household. Otherwise he paid as little attention to the hubbub in the outer apartment as a minister of state pays to the crowd in his ante-room. He was busy classifying a number of those small squares of card-board, which had so puzzled Paul, and, as often happens in moments of preoccupation, he allowed his thoughts to exude in a flow of words.

"What an undertaking!" he muttered, "and yet what a result! I alone, it is true, bear the burden of this enormous task. I alone still hold the threads which, for twenty years, with the patience of a spider weaving his web, I have fastened to so many puppets. At a motion from me they are all alert. And to look at me, who would believe it. When I go down the Rue Montorgueil, the neighbours say, 'There goes Mascarot. That is Mascarot, who keeps an employment office for all the sexes!' They laugh, and I let them laugh. Secret power is always the strongest. The powers men know of are attacked, and oft-time overthrown; but no one knows me—no one."

A more important card than the others now passed under his eyes. He rapidly traced a line or two on its margin, and in a moment or two spoke again. "I may run aground, it's true. Some fine day the meshes of my net may snap, and some of the prey escape—and what then? That fool, the Count de Mussidan, asked me if I knew the laws of my country. I should say I did! No one has studied them more thoroughly; and I know that there may be found in the penal code, Book the Third, Chapter II., a certain clause, No. 400, which seems to have been specially drawn up with the view of hampering my operations. Hard labour for a term of years, if you please; and if a cunning magistrate knocks me over with Article 305, it becomes a question of hard labour for life!" As he spoke these words, a cold shiver passed down his spine; but it was of brief duration, for what a triumphant smile he resumed, "Yes, but to send B. Mascarot to breathe the air at Toulon, B. Mascarot must be trapped first, and B. Mascarot is no fool. Danger in the air, and Mascarot melts, vanishes, evaporates. He may be looked for, and he won't be found. As for those timid gamblers, my associates—Catenac, the miser, and Hortebize, the epicurean—I have kept them out of danger. Croisenois would hardly be suspected, and, besides, he would prefer suicide to confession. Who would be prosecuted then? whom would the police net? Why merely Beaumarchef, La Candèle, Toto-Chupin, and two or three other poor devils. They would be magnificent prizes, and no mistake—prizes to be proud of! However, even they could say nothing, for the very best of reasons, they know nothing." And Mascarot, pleased with his own reasoning, laughed aloud. Then with a haughty gesture, he adjusted his spectacles, and added, "I will march straight to the end I have in view. Through Croisenois I shall make, at one blow, some four millions of francs. Paul shall marry Flavie, that's settled; and so that Flavie may be happy and envied she shall be a duchess with three hundred thousand francs a year."

His squares of card-board were by this time in order; and he now drew from a secret drawer a small address book. He opened it, added two or

three names to those already inscribed, and as he consigned it to its hiding place, threateningly exclaimed, "You are all there, my good friends—all of you, and you don't suspect it. You are rich, all of you—honoured, and comparatively happy; for you flatter yourselves you are free. But you are mistaken, there is a man whom you belong to, body, soul and property, and this man is B. Mascarot, of the Rue Montorgueil. You hold your heads high, no doubt; and yet whenever he chooses you will crawl to his feet, and dispute for the honour of tying his shoe-strings. And it happens, my friends, that Papa Mascarot has worked quite enough, and would like to retire from business; so between you, you will have to furnish him with a comfortable income."

He stopped short, hearing a knock at the door. He touched the bell on his table, and it had hardly ceased to tingle when Beaumarchef appeared on the threshold. "Would you believe it, sir," said the retired military man. "Do you remember telling me to complete the papers respecting young Monsier Gandelu."

"Yes; what then?"

"Why, sir, it so happens that the cook he has engaged for his little lady is in our lists. She owed us eleven francs, and has come to bring them; she is outside now. Her name's Marie. Isn't it lucky now?"

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "You are an idiot," said he coldly, "to be so pleased and astonished at this. I have often explained to you that luck or chance, as you may call it, is simply a field for labour like any other, more extended, possibly, and requiring careful tillage. Now, for twenty years I have sowed crop after crop in this field; and it would be strange indeed, I think, if there were never any harvest!"

Beaumarchef listened to his master open-mouthed in silent wonder at his astuteness.

"Who is this cook?" asked Mascarot.

"Oh! as soon as you see her, sir, you will recognise her. For a long time she has been on the lists in class 'D'—that is, as a cook for a household of a questionable reputation."

Mascarot was reflecting. "Well," said he at last, "fetch me this girl;" and as Beaumarchef turned to obey, he added, as if answering some objection in his own mind, "It would be foolish to neglect the slightest precaution. Experience has shown me this."

But the cook of "class D" was already before him, extremely proud of her admission into the inner sanctuary. At the first glance, it was easy to see why Beaumarchef had placed her in the category he had mentioned. She was received by Mascarot with the unctuous urbanity he was so famous for. "Well, my girl," said he, "so you have found a place to your liking, and where your merits will be appreciated?"

"I hope so, sir; but I have only been at Madame Zora de Chantemille's since two o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Ah! she calls herself Zora de Chantemille, does she?"

"You understand, sir, it is only a name she has taken. She quarrelled about it, too, with my master. She wished to call herself Raphaele, but he insisted on Zora."

"Zora is pretty—very pretty," said Mascarot, gravely.

"Yes, that is just what her maid and I told her. She is a very beautiful woman; and, my eyes! doesn't she make the gold fly! I assure you, sir, she has spent more than thirty thousand francs already."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir; and all on credit, mind you. Monsieur de Gandelu hasn't a son in the world—so a waiter from Potel's told me, and he knew what he was saying. But his father, it seems, is rolling in wealth. Yesterday, for a house-warming, as they called it, they had a dinner—and such a dinner! It cost more than a thousand francs, with the wines."

As Mascarot saw no way of utilizing this woman, he was about to dismiss her, when she, divining his intention, exclaimed, "One moment, I haven't told you anything worth knowing yet."

Mascarot did not expect anything from this source; but he was patient, and had learned to hold himself in subjection when necessary. He knew too that it is unwise for an ambitious man, however far up the ladder he may be, to refuse assistance, no matter how trivial it may seem, so he threw himself back in his chair, and assuming an expression of great interest, exclaimed, "Go on, if you please."

"Well," resumed the cook, "we had a great dinner; eight guests, and madame the only lady. Ah, sir, what handsome men they were! so witty and distinguished, and so beautifully dressed; but my master was the best dressed of all."

"Indeed," drawled Mascarot, lifting his eyebrows.

"By ten o'clock, they were all pretty tipsy, and then what do you think they did? They sent to the concierge, and told him not to let any one pass through the courtyard, as they intended to throw the dinner-service out of the window. And they did it, too. Dishes and plates, glasses and bottles, all flew pell-mell. It seems its an aristocratic practice. The waiters from Potel's told me it was a fashion introduced into Paris by some Russian princes."

Mascarot closed his eyes in despair behind his spectacles. The most heroic resignation has its limits, and so he asked, "Well, well, what did you notice at all curious?"

"Well, sir, among these gentlemen there was one who was tall and dark, badly dressed, and who said nothing. You might have really thought that he was laughing in his sleeve at all the others. However, madame was as sweet as honey to him. She offered him all the delicacies on the table. Will you take this? and will you take that? You are not drinking, and so on. After dinner, while the others were playing cards, he sat down by my mistress and began to talk with her."

"And could you hear what they said?"

"Of course I could: they were near the bedroom door, and so I set it ajar and listened to them."

"That was not very honourable," said Mascarot, in a shocked tone.

"Who cares? I always like to know the private affairs of the people I serve. They were talking of a gentleman madame had known before, a friend of the dark man's—his name, ah! his name, dear me, I've forgotten it—wait a bit!"

Beaumarchef, who had been in the background long enough, thought it was now time to show his admirable memory. "Paul Violaine," said he.

"Precisely," answered the cook, "that was the name!" But after a moment, she exclaimed, in astonishment, "How do you happen to know it?"

Mascarot raised his spectacles and gave his associate a withering glance. "Beaumarchef knows everything," he replied, carelessly. "That is his business."

This explanation was not, perhaps, altogether satisfactory to the estimable cook, but, nevertheless, she resumed her narrative. "Well,"

said she, "madame said that this Paul was a fellow of no account, that she did not trust him at all, and she and the man with the dark beard talked together about his having stolen twelve thousand francs."

Here Mascarot pricked up his ears, and became all attention. It seemed as if his patience was to be rewarded, after all.

"Do you know the name of this man to whom your mistress said this?" asked Mascarot.

"No, indeed. The others called him 'the artist.'"

This vague information did not satisfy the methodical agent. "Listen, my girl," he said, in honeyed tones, "will you do me a great service? I am inclined to believe this man is an artist who owes me money. You must obtain for me his name and address."

"All right! you may rely on me!" she answered, hastily adding, "I must go now, for I have the breakfast to buy. To-morrow, or the day after, you shall have the address." So saying she left the room.

As the door closed after her, Mascarot brought his hand down heavily on his desk. "Hortebize," said he, "is wonderfully clever in sniffing out a danger. Fortunately, I have the means of suppressing both this foolish woman, this Rose, and that greater fool, the young fellow who is ruining himself for her. Ay, they must both be suppressed."

As before, when the same verb passed his master's lips, Beaumarchef put himself on guard.

"Pshaw! how absurd you are with your everlasting gestures," interrupted Mascarot, shrugging his shoulders. "I can do better than that. Rose calls herself nineteen, but she is more; she is over twenty-one. She is consequently of age. Gandelu, however, is still a minor, so that if old Gandelu had a little more nerve—well, it would be moral and funny, both at the same time. Article 354 of the Penal Code is an elastic one."

"What did you say, sir?" asked Beaumarchef, who did not understand.

"I say that before forty-eight hours have passed, I must have the most precise details respecting the character and disposition of the elder Gandelu. I must, by all means, know precisely what are his relations with his son."

"Very well, I will set La Candole on the track."

"And as young Gandelu is in search of money, you had better have him introduced to our honourable friend Verminet, the manager of the Mutual Discount Society."

"But that is M. Taintaine's business, sir."

B. Mascarot was too much pre-occupied to hear. "As to the other," he continued, in answer to his own secret fears, "as to the tall, dark young man—this artist—I fancy that he is more intelligent than the rest of the set; but woe betide him if he crosses my path! When anybody annoys me—" a gesture of terrible significance finished his half uttered sentence. Then, after a moment's silence, he added, "Return to your duties, Beaumarchef; I hear people coming in."

The man did not move, definite as was his dismissal. "Excuse me, sir," said he, "La Candole is out there, and will attend to them. I have my report to make to you."

"Quite right; well, take a seat and speak."

This condescension, and the pleasure of speaking from a chair instead of on his feet (which seldom happened at least with Mascarot), seemed to delight Beaumarchef. "Yesterday," he began, "there was nothing new; but this morning, before I was up, there was a rap at my door. I opened it, and saw Toto-Chupin."

"He had not lost sight of Caroline Schimel, I hope."

"Not for a moment, sir. He had even succeeded in entering into conversation with her, and they went to a café together."

"Good! That was well done."

"Oh! he is pretty cunning, that scamp Toto; and if he were but a trifle more honest—however, to come to the point, he pretends that if this woman drinks it is because she has something on her mind. She believes that some folks who have threatened her, dog her steps. She is so afraid of being assassinated that she does not live alone. She boards with some honest working people, and pays them well, for she has plenty of money."

Mascarot seemed much annoyed. "That's a nuisance," murmured he. "In that case one can't visit her incognito. However, where do these good people reside?"

"At the top of Montmartre, beyond the Château Rouge, in the Rue Mercadet."

"Very well. Tantaine will ascertain. Be sure that Toto makes no mistake, and does not let this woman slip through his fingers."

"There is no danger of that. He even told me that he was on the point of discovering who she really was, where she came from, and if she had any relatives, and the source of her money."

Whilst speaking, Beaumarchef pulled fiercely at his waxed moustache. This gesture indicated that he had a new idea.

"What is it now?" asked his master.

"Why, sir, simply that I should like to tell you to beware of Toto-Chupin. I have discovered that he robs us, and sells our goods below their value."

"Are you dreaming?"

"No, sir; I have had my suspicions for some time, and yesterday I found out the truth from an ill-looking fellow who came here to see Chupin, whom he called his friend."

"Very well," answered Mascarot. "I will find out the truth; and if you are correct, Master Toto shall spend some time in a House of Correction."

Beaumarchef now withdrew, but almost immediately afterwards he returned. "Patron," said he, "here is a servant from the Marquis de Croisenois with a letter."

Mascarot took no pains to conceal his ill-humor. "The marquis is in a deuce of a hurry," he exclaimed. "However, send the man here."

The new-comer made his appearance, irreproachable in garb and deportment; he plainly served in an aristocratic household. He had got himself up in the English style, with a collar as stiff as steel, which rose to his ears, and a neckcloth so tightly fastened that his smooth, shaven face was ruddy enough to suggest a rush of blood to the brain. His coat, made no doubt by a London tailor, was as stiff as if carved from wood. He was apparently of wood himself, and seemed to move under the impulsion of some skilful mechanism concealed beneath his red vest. At each turn he took, one was surprised not to hear the creaking of machinery.

"My master, sir," he said, as he handed a letter to Mascarot, "wished me to give this letter into your own hands."

While the worthy agent broke the seal, he examined this model servant attentively. He did not know him, for Croisenois did not take his servants from the office. "It would seem, my good fellow," remarked Mascarot leisurely, "that your master, contrary to his usual habits, rose with Aurora this morning."

The servant not merely refrained from smiling at the epigram, but really looked shocked. "Monsieur le Marquis," said he, "agreed to give me fifteen louis over and above my wages to gratify his fancy of calling me a good fellow. No one else has the right to do so."

"Ah! ah! ah!" replied the agent, in three different tones, each one more expressive than the other. "I wonder," he said to himself, "where dignity will next instal itself. If I chose to call the marquis a good fellow, he wouldn't think of resenting it."

In the meanwhile M. de Croisenois's envoy, satisfied with his little speech, returned to the duties of his mission. "I think," said he, "that Monsieur le Marquis is still asleep. He wrote this note on returning from his club."

"Are you to wait for an answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well then, wait;" and tossing the envelope aside, Mascarot read as follows: "My dear Sir,—Gambling has its ups and downs as you are aware: you will guess the remainder, no doubt. I have played at cards so unluckily to-night, that in addition to my ready money, I have lost three thousand francs on parole. I must have this money before noon; my honour demands it."

The agent shrugged his shoulders, and muttered, loud enough for the servant, who was watching him from the corner of his eye, to hear him if he chose. "His honour! Great heavens! it is enough to make a man laugh. His honour, indeed!"

But not a muscle in the face of this well-drilled servant quivered. He stood as stilly as a Prussian soldier, seeming neither to see nor hear. Mascarot therefore resumed his perusal. "Am I wrong in relying on you for this trifle? I think not. I feel certain even that you will send me a hundred and fifty or two hundred louis in addition, for I cannot remain without a sou. And of the great affair—what news? It is with my feet on fire that I await your decision.—Most truly yours,

"HENRI, MARQUIS DE CROISENOIS."

"And so," grumbled the agent. "A pretty game indeed. Five thousand francs on the spot, *hic et nunc*. Find them, good Mascarot; open your strong box. But, frivolous, wasteful creature, if I did not need your fine name, bequeathed to you by your ancestors, a name you daily drag through the mire—if I did not need your name, I say, you might whistle for your five thousand francs."

The unfortunate thing was that Croisenois was one of the most important cards in the game that the adventurous Mascarot was playing; and so, despite his evident reluctance, he took from his strong box five notes of a thousand francs each.

"Do you desire a receipt?" asked the servant.

"It is of no consequence—the letter will answer every purpose; but wait a moment;" and the agent, ever regardful of future emergencies, drew from his pocket a gold piece of twenty francs, and laying it on the table, said in his most engaging tone, "Take this, my friend, for your trouble!"

But the other drew back. "You will excuse me, sir, if I refuse. When I enter a gentleman's service, I ask for wages high enough to have no need of gratuities." After this dignified reply, he bowed, and, as solemn as a Quaker, retired with measured steps.

The agent was actually nonplussed. Twenty years of singular experiences had never furnished him with anything so theoretically impractical.

as this. "It is absolutely incredible," he muttered. "Where the devil did Croisenois pick up this fellow? Can it be that the marquis is stronger and wiser than I have hitherto fancied?"

An inexplicable anxiety, a vague and confused presentiment, disturbed his mind. "Is it possible," he continued, "that this individual is not a real servant? I have made so many enemies in my time that they are numerous enough to form an avalanche. However skilfully I hold my cards, some one may have seen my hand." This idea made him tremble. Some schemes are so perilous, that as the decisive moment approaches everything furnishes cause for distrust and fear. Mascarot had almost grown afraid of his shadow, and his anxiety was well-nigh unbearable. However, after a moment's thought, he seemed to shake off his most oppressive fears. "No, no," he said, shaking his head, "I am a little cracked, and my brain is misty with chimerical suspicions. If there were a man skilful enough to have penetrated my plans, patient enough to assume the Croisenois livery to watch my movements with greater facility, he would certainly never have been so simple as to excite attention by such singular manners and deportment."

He said all this with the view of reassuring himself, no doubt; and yet, in reality, he was in the position of the coward who whistles in the dark in the hope of dispelling his fears. However, surely among all his expedients, among all his means of investigation, there must be some way of discovering this servant's antecedents, and he began to reflect what might be done with that object in view. He was still puzzling his brain, when Beaumarchef appeared once more on the threshold in a great state of excitement. "You here again!" exclaimed Mascarot, harshly. "Am I to have one moment's peace to-day?"

"Sir, that young fellow is here."

"Paul?"

"Yes, sir."

"At this hour? I told him to come at noon. Something must have happened to him—"

He stopped short, for the door which Beaumarchef had left ajar was at this moment fully opened by Paul Violaine. Plainly enough, something extraordinary had befallen the agent's protégé. He was deadly pale, and his eyes had the peculiar, hunted expression of an animal who has been a long time pursued. His clothes were unbrushed, and his general appearance told of a night passed in aimless wanderings. "Ah! sir—" he began.

But with an imperious gesture Mascarot imposed silence. "Leave us, Beaumar," said he; "and you, my child, sit down."

Paul seated himself, or, rather, fell on the nearest chair. "My life is finished," he murmured; "I am dishonoured—lost."

The estimable agent looked as bewildered as if he had fallen from the clouds; but, in point of fact, his great stupefaction was feigned. He knew why Paul came to him in this condition; for, like a dramatist who conducts his personages from prologue to finish, he had himself prepared the events which had so disturbed his protégé. If he was surprised, it was only at the prompt and violent effect of his combinations. With all one's experience, it is sometimes difficult, when charging a mine, to calculate the results with absolute precision. It was, however, with the air of an amiable and sympathetic listener that he drew his chair nearer, and said, "Be calm, my dear boy; have every confidence in me, and open your heart. What in the world has happened?"

Paul half rose, and in a tragic tone replied, "Rose has deserted me!" Mascarot raised both arms to heaven. "And for this you say that your life is wrecked? Do you not realise that the future is full of promise?"

"I loved Rose, sir," answered Paul, in such a melo-dramatic style that Mascarot was tempted to smile.

"But that was not all," continued the young fellow, who made heroic but useless efforts to restrain his tears. "I am accused of an infamous robbery."

"You?" asked Mascarot, at the same time saying to himself, "Ah! now we've come to it."

"Yes, sir, I! and you are the only human being who can prove my innocence, for you alone know the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes, sir, you can save me. Yesterday you were so very kind to me that I at once thought of you, and took the liberty of coming earlier than the time you had named, to ask your aid."

"But what can I do?"

"Everything, sir. Let me tell you the singular fatality of which I have become a victim."

Mascarot's features expressed the liveliest interest. "Go on!" said he.

"Yesterday, sir," resumed Paul, "a short time after leaving you, I went back to the Hôtel du Pérou. I hastened upstairs, and on the mantelshelf I found this letter from Rose."

He held out the letter, but Mascarot did not condescend to touch it.

"Rose, sir, tells me that she loves me no longer, and entreats me never to try and see her again. She tells me that, tired of poverty with me, she accepts a fortune that has been offered her—diamonds and a carriage."

"And that surprises you?"

"Ah! How could I anticipate such infamous treason, when only the evening before she could not find oaths enough to swear that she loved me? Why did she lie? Did she wish to make the shock greater? Gone! Ah, I fell to the floor as if felled by a hammer. On climbing the stairs, I had pictured to myself how delighted she would be to hear of all you had promised me! For more than an hour I remained in that room, almost unconscious, absorbed in the bitter thought that I should never see her again."

Mascarot watched Paul carefully, and with his usual penetration was at no loss in coming to a decision. "Your words are too profuse, my boy," he said to himself. "for your grief to be very deep or very sincere." And then aloud he asked, "But about the robbery—the accusation?"

"In a moment, sir. After awhile I decided to obey your injunctions and leave the Hôtel du Pérou, with which I was by this time more than ever disgusted."

"Naturally."

"I went down-stairs to take leave of Madame Loupias and pay her, when, sir—ah! what shame overwhelms me—as I handed her my two weeks' rent, she looked at me with the utmost contempt, and asked me where I had stolen that money."

Mascarot had some difficulty in concealing his satisfaction at the success of the little machination he had planned. "What did you say?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir, I was horrorstruck, and my tongue cleaved to my palate. Loupias approached his wife, and they both stood snarling at me. Then, after enjoying my confusion awhile, they declared they were certain that Rose and I had robbed M. Tantine between us."

"And you made no attempt at denial, at defence?"

"I had lost my head entirely; I only realised that what had occurred justified the suspicion. The evening before Madame Loupias had asked Rose for money, and was told we had none, and had no idea where to get any. Now, you see, on the morrow I appeared in new clothes and paid my debts, while Rose had gone off some hours previously."

"It is natural that these coincidences should strike your landlord as very singular."

"The worst was that Rose had changed the five hundred franc note lent us by Father Tantaine at a grocer's shop, kept by a man named Mélusin, and it was this scoundrel who started the report about us. He even dared to say that a detective, who was charged with arresting us, had called upon him to make inquiries."

Mascarot knew all this even better than Paul, and yet he thought fit to prolong the explanation. "Come," said he, "I fail to grasp your meaning, or to understand the precise cause of your grief. Has there been a robbery committed?"

"How can I tell? I have never seen Monsieur Tantaine since that day, and he has never returned to the hotel. It is said he has been robbed, that a large sum has been stolen from him, and that, as it belonged to his employers, he is now in prison."

"Why did you not tell the truth?"

"What good would it have done? It can be proved that Monsieur Tantaine was no friend of mine, not even an acquaintance. Folks would have laughed in my face had I said, 'Last evening he came into my room, and then and there presented me with five hundred francs.'"

For a moment Mascarot looked puzzled, as if trying to solve some riddle. "Ah! I have it," he said at last, "and my theory corresponds entirely with Tantaine's character."

Paul listened as if his life depended on every word. "Tantaine," resumed Mascarot, "is the most honest man I know, and has the kindest of hearts, but he has cobwebs in his brain. He was rich once, but was ruined by his generosity. He is as poor as Job now, but he has the same longing as before to be useful."

"But—"

"Let me finish. The misfortune is, that in the place where he is employed, and which he owes to me, he has the handling of some small amount of funds. Overwhelmed with pity at the sight of your despair, he disposed of other people's property as he would have done of his own. Suddenly called upon to hand in his accounts, and finding himself face to face with a deficit, he lost courage, and declared he had been robbed. Inquiries were no doubt made. It was ascertained you and Rose had been living in the next room to him, you were seen with money you did not account for, and so suspicion was excited against you."

This was all indisputable. Paul shivered, and his brow was moist with a cold sweat. He already in imagination saw himself arrested, judged, and condemned. "However," added he, "M. Tantaine has my promissory note, which is a proof of my good faith."

"Poor child! Do you think that if he hoped to save himself by accusing you, he would venture to produce your note?"

"But, fortunately, sir, you know the truth."

Mascarot shook his head sadly. "Should I be believed?" he asked. "Justice is but a human institution, my friend—that is to say, it is sub-

ject to error. Having to choose between truth and falsehood, it can, of course, decide only by appearances. Now tell me, are not appearances against you?"

This pitiless logic seemed to crush Paul. "Then I have but one resource—I must die," he murmured, "for I cannot live dishonoured."

The combination devised by Mascaret with the view of reducing Paul Violaine to absolute subjection was of almost childish simplicity, but he had considered it sufficient, and he was right; for Paul had been so overwhelmed, that he had failed to perceive the connecting link between the extraordinary loan of the five hundred franc note and the accusation of theft founded on changing it. Easily intimidated, like all persons who are not quite sure of their ability to resist temptation, he had begun by flying from the enemy, and now he surrendered himself with bound limbs. This was precisely what Mascaret had counted on. The surgeon who decides on a perilous operation often begins by weakening his patient, and Dr. Hortebize's friend had followed this mode of treatment. He had begun by breaking such remaining vestiges of will as Paul had possessed, before proceeding to remodel him in accordance with his purposes. And indeed young Violaine now seemed utterly crushed. He lay half extended in the agent's arm-chair, inert, exhausted, imagining that suicide was the only issue to his many troubles.

The moment had come to strike the last blow. "Come, my child," said Mascaret, "you must not despair."

No answer.

Did Paul hear, or not? At all events he seemed destitute of comprehension. But Mascaret was determined that he should both hear and understand, and so, shaking him roughly by the arm, he cried, "Wake up! Rouse yourself! In your position a young fellow helps himself and shows that he's a man!"

"What's the use of struggling?" sighed Paul. "Haven't you just shown me that I could never hope to prove my innocence?"

This unmanly weakness made Mascaret very impatient, but he dissimulated. "No," he answered, "no; I have merely wished to show you the alarming side of your affairs."

"There is but one side."

"You are mistaken; I had not finished. I may be as easily mistaken. We are only *supposing* that Tantaine disposed of funds confided to him. Are we sure of it? Are we sure of his arrest? We merely suppose it is he who has thrown all the blame on you. Is this true? Before giving up the game in despair, would it not be as well to make certain?"

As Mascaret spoke, Paul felt himself revive. "That is true, certainly," he murmured.

"Of course it is! I have said nothing, moreover, of the influence I have over Tantaine—influence that I can use to make him confess the truth."

Characters like Paul's have the happy faculty of grasping at the least ray of hope, and are elevated as easily as they are depressed. A moment before he had believed himself lost, and now he considered himself rescued. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Shall I ever be able to prove to you my gratitude?"

Mascaret's face beamed with paternal kindness. "Perhaps," said he, "perhaps. And as a beginning, you must utterly forget the past. When daylight comes you drive away the night's bad dreams, don't you? Now, I wake you to a new life from this hour; make a new man of yourself."

Paul sighed. "Rose!" he murmured; "I cannot forget Rose!"

The worthy agent frowned at this name. "What!" he cried. "Do you still think of that creature? There are folks I know, who console themselves readily enough after finding out that they have been dupes and playthings; their love increases, in fact, with each new treason. If you are made of this facile clay, we shall never understand each other. Run and find your pretty, faithless mistress, throw yourself at her feet, and implore her to forgive your poverty."

Under the stroke of irony, Paul straightened himself up. "I will be revenged on her one of these days," he eagerly replied.

"That is a very easy thing to do. Forget her."

In spite of Paul's determined tone, a certain amount of hesitation was to be read in his eyes—a hesitation which was extremely displeasing to Mascaret. "Have you no ambition?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; I have."

"No, sir, you have not, or you would never think of embarrassing your self with a woman like Rose. You should keep your arms free, my boy, if you wish to make any use of your elbows in the battle of life. What would you say of a runner who, hoping to gain the prize, fastened a cannon ball to his leg? You would of course say, 'He is mad!' Very well, that is precisely your condition."

"I will follow your advice, sir," said Paul, this time without an after-thought.

"That's proper speaking. Believe me, the day is not far off when you will thank heaven for inspiring Rose with the idea and the means of deserting you. You can easily climb higher!"

For thirty years Mascaret had speculated on human passions and weaknesses; he understood men thoroughly. With ten words he had gained a decisive influence over Paul.

"Then, sir," the young fellow began, "this situation at twelve thousand francs a year—"

"There has never been any such situation, my friend."

Paul turned deadly pale. He saw himself sent away penniless, reduced once more to live in some hole like the Hôtel du Pérou, and this time alone. "But sir," he stammered, "you allowed me to hope for—"

"What! twelve thousand francs? Be easy. You shall have that, and more; but you will remain with me. I am growing old, I have no family, and you shall be my son."

At this proposition, Paul's brow grew dark. The idea that his life would be passed in this office was revolting to him; the thought of answering the questions and inscribing the names of the numerous applicants was humiliating to his vanity.

Mascaret read this impression with perfect ease, from behind his spectacles. "And the fool is without bread and butter. Ah!" he mused, "if it were not for Flavia—if it were not for the Champdouce affair!" Then, aloud, he resumed, "Do not imagine, my dear child, that I wish to condemn you to the hard unpleasant labours of an employment agent. By no means, I have other views for you, far more worthy of your merits. You please me, and I promise myself the very great pleasure of realizing your ambitious dreams. To carry out my plans, you have every requisite, save those which are generally lacking in young people—prudence and steadiness of purpose. Ah, well, I must be prudent and steady for you." He paused for a moment, as if to impart additional weight to his words,

and then added, "I was thinking much of you yesterday, and I planned in my mind the edifice of your future. He is poor, I said to myself; and this, at his age, with his tastes and ideas, is cruel. But why shouldn't I marry him to one of those heiresses who bring a million or two in their aprons to the man who touches their hearts?"

"Alas!"

"Why 'alas!' pray? Are you still thinking of Rose?"

"By no means. I merely wished to say—"

"When I speak to you of heiresses, it is because I already know of one, and my friend Dr. Hortebize would soon introduce you to her. Rose is pretty, but she is nearly as pretty as Rose, and is, besides, well born, well educated, and clever. She has distinguished family connections, and if her husband were a man of talent—a poet, or composer—he might easily rise to any position."

Paul's face flushed. He had himself often fancied all this, in days long past.

"Knowing your illegitimate birth," continued Mascarat, "I wove the most beautiful romance for you. Before '93, you know, every bastard was regarded as a gentleman, for the very good reason that he did not know who his father might be. Who can say that your's does not bear one of the grandest names in France, and is not possessed of untold wealth? Perhaps at this very moment he is searching for you to give to you his fortune and his name. Would you like to be a duke?"

"Sir," stammered Paul, "sir—"

B. Mascarat burst out laughing. "As yet," said he, "we are only talking of suppositions and wishes."

The young man did not know what to think. "Then what do you wish me to do, sir?" he asked.

The agent grew very serious. "I wish and claim absolute obedience," he replied—"an obedience at once prompt and unreasoning, that asks no questions and makes no comments."

"I will obey you, sir, but I implore you not to trifle with me."

"Instead of making any reply; Mascarat rang his bell for Beaumarchef, who promptly appeared. "I leave you alone," he said; "I am going to Van Klopen's." Then, turning towards Paul, he added, "I never trifle, and to-day you shall have the proof of my assertion. Now, we will go to a restaurant to breakfast; I wish to talk with you, and afterwards—" he paused, the better to enjoy Paul's surprise, and then added—"afterwards I will show you the young girl I intend for you. To begin with, I am anxious to know if she pleases you."

XI.

YOUNG Gaston de Gandelu, the model of Parisian chivalry, had excellent reasons to be astonished on finding that André, a *genre* painter, was ignorant even of the very existence of M. Van Klopen; for the reputation of this extraordinary man has travelled through Europe. One may convince oneself of this by glancing at his bills, decorated with engravings of innumerable medals gained at International Exhibitions. On one side may be read the words, "Under the High Patronage of Her Catholic Majesty the Queen of All the Spains," and on the other. "By Special Appointment to the courts of Russia, Denmark, and Sweden." Van Klopen was not an Alsatian, as Gandelu, who, perhaps, regarded Germany as a province

of Alsace, had said. No, Van Klopen was a genuine Dutchman. In 1850 this intelligent man, established as a tailor in his native town, cut from cloth purchased on credit the long vests and monumental coats which impart such dignity to the petty burgoimasters of Holland. Van Klopen was not successful, and in short, having failed, was obliged to abscond from his creditors. He took refuge in Paris, that centre of feverish competition, and seemed destined to die of hunger there. But something very different happened.

One fine morning he rented, for twenty-six thousand francs a year, a superb apartment in the Rue de Gramont, and installed on each side of the doorway of the house a marble slab, bearing the inscription :—

VAN KLOPEN.

LADIES' TAILOR.

He published innumerable "puffs" in all the most widely circulated newspapers, declaring himself to be the "Regenerator of Fashion," the "Sovereign Pontiff of Feminine Elegance," and the "Tailor of the Queens of Europe." These ideas could never have originated in the brain of the stout Hollander. And, moreover, whence came his funds? On this point he was silent. At first the enterprise was by no means a success. For a month and more, Paris held its sides laughing at the boundless pretensions of the "Regenerator of Fashion, from Rotterdam." But Van Klopen let the Parisians laugh, bowing his head under the storm he had aroused. He was quite right. His advertisements at last brought him two customers, who soon trumpeted his fame.

One was a very great lady, even more adventurous and eccentric than she was noble, the Duchess de Salmense. The other was no less distinguished in her way, being a celebrity of the *demi-monde*—in fact, Jenny Fanny, then living under the protection of the Comte de Trémorel; and for these two, Van Klopen composed toilettes which far surpassed anything that had ever been worn or dreamed of before. From this moment he was launched. Success came to him as it always comes in Paris—complete, astonishing, overwhelming, so to say. One curious point was that every lady's maid in Paris sang his praises to her mistress. At last, his reputation became world wide, and defied the assaults of every rival. He even had to refuse orders, being assailed on every side. "I must choose my customers," he said, loftily, and he did choose them, weeding out all those whom he thought would not add to his reputation. So thus, the noblest and the wealthiest dames in Paris disputed the honour of being dressed by him.

The proudest women submitted to his scrutiny, and confided secrets to him they dared not acknowledge to their husbands, enduring, moreover, with perfect equanimity, the touch of his big coarse hands on their shoulders as he took their measures.

It was the fashion! His *salons* were neutral ground, so to say, where women of very different classes met, jostled, and examined each other. Madame la Duchesse de R—— was delighted to be able to have a good stare at the notorious Mademoiselle Bischy, for whom the Baron de N—— had blown out the small amount of brains he possessed. In employing the same dressmaker, her grace perhaps hoped to acquire some of this creature's power of fascination. On her side, Mademoiselle Dianant, the actress, whose salary at the *Délassements Comiques*, as was generally known, merely amounted to some hundred crowns a year, was overjoyed to crush, by the extravagance of her orders, all the belles of society assembled in Van

Klophen's salon. Between these various customers, the cunning ladies' tailor dispensed his favours with remarkable impartiality and tact; and thus he was held as the dearest and best of men. How many times had he not heard lovely lips exclaim, "Remember, Klophen, if I don't have my dress for Tuesday, I shall die!"

In winter, in the "ball" season, a procession of carriages formed in the street in front of his establishment. Between nine o'clock and midnight, two hundred fair beings besieged his house, anxious that the last pin should be fixed by the master's hand, and eager for his approving smile. He passed the brilliant throng in review, coldly, impassively, often with a cigar between his teeth; but then he might take almost any liberty with impunity. Praise fell but seldom from his lips. He knew that "Very good" spoken by him thrilled the elect and maddened a score of rivals. The more or less fragile ties of vanity were not, however, the only bonds he employed to enslave his customers. Whenever his inquiries were satisfactory, he offered credit, and, in addition, he often lent his customers money. In these days of reckless expenditure, no wonder that the ladies' tailor should have become the horror of husbands. Poor husbands! They slumbered peacefully, admiring their wives' order, economy, and good management; but suddenly—ah! what a bitter awakening—the phlegmatic Dutchman stepped on the scene with a little bill for twenty thousand francs. What could be done except to pay? Yes, pay or plead; for Van Klophen pleaded—on one occasion summoning the brilliant Marchioness de Reversay before the courts, and on another suing the adventuress Chinchette, the actress, the same who, as you may remember, came to such a sad end. Well might husbands and fathers dread this usurer in silk and velvet. Woe to the woman who allowed herself to be inveigled in the snares of his system. The woman who owed him a thousand crowns was lost, for she could never say to what depths of degradation she might be compelled to descend to obtain the money to pay him. And yet there were even old and honourable names on his books!

It was not surprising that so much prosperity should have turned Van Klophen's head. He was stout and rosy, impudent, vain, and cynical. His flatterers pretended he was witty. Such, then, was the man on whom Mascarot and his protégé called, after a bountiful luncheon at Philippe's. Van Klophen's establishment needs a word of mention. A superb carpet, put down at his expense, covered the stairs to his own door on the first floor. In the ante-room, two footmen in full livery, gorgeous in gold lace, were seated at the large ornamental stove. On perceiving Mascarot's entrance they rose respectfully, and one of them hastened to anticipate what would naturally be the visitor's first question. "Monsieur Van Klophen," said he, "is engaged with Madame la Princesse Korasof, but when he is informed who wishes to see him, he will free himself. Will you kindly take the trouble to go to my master's private room?"

"Oh! we are in no haste," replied Mascarot; "we will wait in the salon with the customers. Are there many people there?"

"About a dozen ladies, sir."

"Very well! They will amuse me."

And without waiting for a rejoinder, Mascarot opened one side of a folding door and pushed Paul into a vast apartment profusely gilded and ornamented in the worst possible taste, but distinguished by one extraordinary feature. The wall paper was almost entirely concealed by a prodigious number of little water-colour sketches, representing women in every imagin-

able kind of toilette. Each sketch had its inscription, such as, "Toilette of Madame de C—— for a dinner at the Russian Embassy." "State robes for the Arch-duchess W—— of Austria." "Ball dress for the Marchioness de V——." "Negligée for Mademoiselle S—— B——." "Seaside costume for Madame H—— de R—— at Trouville." "Confirmation dress for Mademoiselle D——." It was Van Klopen himself who had devised this means of bequeathing his conceptions to posterity.

Such as the salon was, it nevertheless astonished Paul by its brilliancy of colour and profusion of gilding, and, somewhat abashed, he lingered on the threshold—indeed, not daring to advance, since he perceived no unoccupied chair to sit down upon. But Mascaret's coolness was enough for both. Catching his protégé by the arm, he drew him to a sofa, whispering in his ear, "Look out! the heiress is here."

Men so seldom entered this feminine sanctuary, where a dozen élégantes patiently awaited the good pleasure of Fashion's sovereign, that the appearance of B. Mascaret and Paul Violaine positively created a sensation—a sensation all the greater on account of Paul's good looks, which were really enhanced by his air of bashful timidity. The buzz of conversation suddenly ceased, and under the fire of twelve pair of eyes, Paul felt his cheeks burn, and began to play with his hat, like a peasant before a magistrate, not daring even to raise his eyes. His confusion by no means suited Mascaret. He had brought his protégé there for a purpose, and he wished him to look about the room. He himself was by no means intimidated by this brilliant throng. As he entered, he bowed all round, with the superannuated graces of a dandy of 1820, and now, seated on the sofa, he seemed as much at his ease as in his own office, in the midst of his cooks and footmen. His imperturbable assurance was due, it must be admitted, to his profound contempt for human nature, and still more to his spectacles. If people only knew how useful coloured glasses are in concealing inner emotions, they would be worn by the entire universe. However, considerably enough, the worthy agent desired that his protégé should have a few minutes to recover himself, and grow accustomed to the heavy, perfumed atmosphere of the salon; but finally, seeing that Paul still kept his eyes cast down, he touched him lightly on the arm. "Is this the first time," he whispered, "that you ever saw ladies in grand toilette—are you afraid of them?"

Paul made an effort to show a bold front.

"Look to the right," continued Mascaret. "Between the window and the piano—there she is!"

Near the window, with her maid standing beside her, sat a young girl, apparently not more than eighteen years old. She was not, perhaps, as pretty as Mascaret had said, but there was something very striking in her face—a singular expression that struck an observer at the first glance. She was slender, frail, and delicate looking, and very dark. Her features lacked regularity, but her black hair was wonderfully glossy and abundant, and her eyes of a dark blue tinge were full of tenderness. The purple of her lips bespoke a sanguine temperament, and her bossy forehead indicated remarkable obstinacy to the phrenologist. Everything about her spoke of passion; or, rather, she seemed the incarnation of passion itself.

Paul's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the corner of the room where she sat. Their glances met, and both started at the same moment as if they had received a shock from the same electric battery. Paul remained motionless, absolutely fascinated; while as for the young girl, so great was her

emotion that she turned suddenly aside, fearing to be remarked. But no one heeded her.

Conversation had been resumed, and all the other customers were listening with admiration to a lady who was describing, in the most affected manner, one of the last toilettes she had worn in the Bois. "It was wonderful!" she said; "and only Van Klopen could have created anything so exquisite. All those women in open victorias were simply furious, and the Marquis de Croisenois told me that Jenny Fancy absolutely wept with rage. Just imagine three green skirts of different shades, each of them cut and looped—"

But the excellent Mascarot cared little for this description. He had watched Paul and the young girl, and a smile now curved his withered lips. "Well?" said he to his protégé.

Paul could hardly restrain himself, as he murmured, "She is adorable!"

"And a millionaire," insisted Mascarot.

"Oh, if she hadn't a penny, any man might fall down and worship her!"

Mascarot coughed slightly, and arranged his spectacles. "Now," he thought, "I have you, my boy! Whether your emotion be feigned or real—whether you adore the girl or her dowry—is all the same. You will be governed by me." With this paternal reflection he again leaned towards his protégé. "Have you no desire to hear her name?"

"Tell me, I beg you."

"Flavia!"

Paul was in ecstasies. He had now the requisite courage to look at the girl deliberately; she had turned away, and he thought, forgetting the numerous reflections in the various mirrors, that she could not see him.

In the meanwhile, the lady who had created such a sensation with her green dress was rambling on. "Have you heard," she asked, "what has happened to the poor Countess de Luxé. It is really dreadful! I am so sorry for her, for she's a perfect angel. Would you believe it? She had her dresses cleaned and dyed, and economized in every way, and all the time her husband was squandering money on an actress. When she heard of it, she nearly died of grief; and I swore to myself, that if my husband was ever ruined, it should be by me and not by any one else."

She stopped short, for at this moment the door was thrown noisily open, and Van Klopen appeared in all his glory. He was only five feet four in height, and almost as broad. His red face indicated considerable partiality for the bottle, his expression was thoroughly insolent, and he spoke with the strong accent of a citizen of Rotterdam. As usual, he wore a dressing-gown of garnet-coloured velvet with a lace frill and ruffles; and several diamond rings adorned his fingers. "Whose turn is it?" he asked abruptly.

It was precisely the turn of the talkative lady, and she was already rising, when the tailor peremptorily stopped her. He had just caught a glimpse of Mascarot, and hastened to greet him with marked cordiality. "Is it you," he exclaimed "whom I have so long kept waiting? Excuse me, pray."

There was a murmur round the room—but a very, very faint one.

"Please come into my private room," resumed Van Klopen. "Ah! this gentleman is with you? Very good. Walk in, gentlemen, walk in."

As he spoke, he all but pushed Mascarot and Paul before him; and he was about to retire from the salon without a word of apology, when one of the ladies started forward, and as he retreated into a lobby outside, cleverly joined him, closing the door behind her. "One word, sir," she said; "one word in heaven's name."

Van Klopen looked at her with an air of annoyance. "What's the matter now?" he asked, impatiently.

"Why, sir, to-morrow my note of 3,000 francs is due."

"Very possibly."

"And I have no money to meet it!"

"Nor have I."

"However, I have come to entreat you to renew it for two months, sir; only two months. One month even, on whatever conditions you may choose."

The ladies' tailor shrugged his shoulder. "In two months," he said, "you will be no better able to pay than to-day. If the note is not paid to-morrow it will be protested."

"Good heavens! And then my husband will know!"

"Precisely. I wish him to know, for it is to him I must look for payment!"

The unhappy woman turned deadly pale. "Yes," she said, "my husband will pay; but I am ruined."

"I can't help it. I have partners who insist."

"Ah! don't tell me that, sir, I implore you. Save me. My husband has paid my debts three times, and he swore—ah! you don't know what an oath he took! I have children, sir. He is quite capable of taking them away from me. For pity's sake, dear Mr. Van Klopen—"

She wrung her hands and sobbed. She was almost on her knees, but the illustrious man milliner was still impassively frigid. "When a woman is the mother of a family," said he, "she should take a dressmaker by the day. There are some who really make charming dresses."

She still tried to move him. She snatched his hands and seemed ready to press them to her lips. "If you only knew," she sobbed. "I shall never dare go home. I shall never have the courage to tell my husband."

Van Klopen gave an insolent laugh. "Ah! well," said he, "if you are afraid of your own husband, try some other woman's!" and disengaging himself roughly, and abandoning the unhappy woman in the lobby, he hurried into his consulting room, where Paul and Mascarot were waiting for him. The *arbitrator elegantiarum* had plainly lost his temper, for he banged the door behind him, with unusual violence. "Did you hear that conversation?" he asked Mascarot. "Scenes of this kind occur every now and then, and are by no means pleasant." He paused, glanced inquisitively at the right hand, wiped it, and added with a sneer, "Why, she actually shed tears on my hand."

Paul looked on in disgust. The first impulses of his heart were still good. If that moment, he had been the happy owner of three thousand francs, he would certainly have taken them to this poor woman, whose sobs he still heard in the lobby. "It is frightful!" he said.

His remark seemed to scandalize the tailor, who, in a cynical tone rejoined, "Ah, my dear sir, you attach too much importance to these hysterical attacks. If you were in my place, you would soon learn what they amount to. After all, I have to defend my money and my partners. You don't know, perhaps, that all these pretty creatures whom I dress, are mad with vanity, and care for nothing but their toilettes. Father, mother and husband—they would give them all, with their children thrown in, to open an account with me. You don't know what a woman is capable of in order to procure a new dress, to crush some rival with. It is only when the day of settlement comes that they think or talk of their families."

"Yes; but you know that with this lady you run no risk. Her husband—"

"Ah! yes; her husband," cried Van Klopen, warming up. "Husbands amuse me very much! If you happen to see them when you go with patterns to their houses, they are dreadfully civil and complimentary, for they like fine clothes worn in their honour. But when the bill is presented, it is quite another matter. They roll their eyes, and talk of pitching you out of the window."

Despite this rejoinder, and with the best faith in the world, Paul went on pleading the cause of the poor woman outside. "But husbands are often deceived," said he.

"That's rubbish. They know well enough. At all events in their position they ought to take their precautions. But no; they find it pleasanter to feign ignorance. When they have given their wives a hundred louis per month, they look on themselves as free, and pretend not to be surprised at all the gorgeous dresses their wives wear. Now, common sense should tell them that their wives must get the dresses on credit. To tell the truth, they know what they are about. Madame begins by opening an account, and by-and-bye monsieur disputes the bill, and insists on a reduction. I know the game."

The tailor seemed so angry, that Mascarot concluded that his intervention was advisable. "I think that you have been a little hard," he said.

Van Klopen gave him a significant glance. "Pshaw!" he replied, "I shall be paid to-morrow—I know who'll pay me, too. Then I shall receive another order, and the whole farce will be acted over again. I had my reasons for answering as I did."

These reasons were perhaps not such as would bear the light of day, for he did not give them aloud, but drew Mascarot into a recess, where the pair whispered together, laughing heartily at intervals, as if at some capital joke. Not wishing to be taxed with indiscretion, Paul proceeded to examine the consulting room, as Van Klopen called it. He saw no writing materials, but innumerable scissors, yard sticks, and measures, quantities of samples of stuffs, and piles of water-colour sketches; while at the further end stood six forms, clothed in paper patterns—patterns of the newest creations of this master mind. Paul had just examined the last of these, when the two friends, as he supposed them to be, returned to the fire-side.

"We are losing our time," said Mascarot. "I intended to glance over our books, but there are too many persons waiting for you in the salon."

"And that prevents you?" rejoined the tailor, carelessly. "Wait a moment." He disappeared, and almost immediately afterwards could be heard saying, "I am very sorry, ladies, very sorry, on my honour; but I am much occupied with a silk merchant. You understand that it is all in your interest—entirely so—unfortunately I may be some time."

"We will wait," replied the patient customers in chorus.

Van Klopen returned to his consulting room, with a look of triumph on his face. "It's no harder than that," said he. "They would remain here till night time on the chance of speaking with their little Klopen. Poor little fools! Ah! they are true Parisians. You may run after them with civilities, and they will scamper away. But if, on the contrary, you laugh at them and insult them, they will literally worship you. If ever my reputation shows signs of decline, I shall simply shut up, nail a card on the

inscription, he public ot admitted here,' and on the morrow there'll be a perfect crowd craving audience."

Mascarot nodded approval, while the tailor drew a huge ledger from a drawer.

"Business has never been better," resumed Van Klopen. "In the last nine days we have had orders amounting to 87,000 francs."

"That's good; but let us see about the doubtful affairs. I'm in a hurry."

The High Pontiff of fashion turned over the leaves of his book. "Here we are," said he. "Since February 14th, Mademoiselle Virginie Cluche has ordered five evening toilettes, two dominos, and three visiting costumes."

"That is a great deal!"

"That's why I wish to consult you. She only owes a comparative trifle -- one or two thousand francs."

"Too much though, if it be true, as I hear, that her protector is ruined. Don't refuse, but avoid taking any new orders."

Van Klopen's only answer was to inscribe various cabalistic letters on the margin of his book.

"On the 6th of the same month the Comtesse de Mussidan sends an important order--important for herself, I mean. Also a plain dress for her daughter. Her account has become very heavy. The count does not pay; in fact, he warned me that he wouldn't."

"No matter, go on. You may even offer her more credit."

Another marginal note.

"On the 7th a new client opened an account. Mademoiselle Flavia Martin Rogul, the daughter of the banker, no doubt."

At this name Paul started, but the worthy agent did not seem to notice his protégé's perturbation. "My dear fellow," said he addressing Van Klopen, "keep that young lady's name carefully in mind. No matter what she asks for, were it even your whole house, grant it at once; and, remember, the most absolute deference. The least levity of manner might cause trouble. She is now in the salon; let her come here as soon as we have gone."

By Van Klopen's look of astonishment, Paul judged that Mascarot was not given to this kind of recommendation. "You shall be obeyed," answered the ladies' tailor, and he turned once more to his ledger. "On the 8th, a young gentleman, named Gaston de Gandelu, was presented here by Monsieur Luper the jeweller. His father is very rich, it is said, and he himself will receive a considerable sum when he reaches his majority, which is near at hand. He asks for a credit of fifteen or twenty thousand francs for a person he is protecting."

The agent repressed a smile, and looked steadily at Paul through his spectacles; but the young fellow evinced no surprise or emotion. This name of Gandelu told him nothing.

"The young woman," continued the tailor, "came in person yesterday. She calls herself Zora de Chantemille. The fact is, she is outrageously pretty."

Mascarot reflected for a few moments.

"You can't imagine," he said at last, "how that young Gandelu worries me. I would give something to find a means of getting him out of Paris."

Van Klopen's face became deeply suffused. The least effort at reflection, sending his blood to his brain, always produced this effect. "Ah!" said he, striking his brow, "that is easily settled. Gandelu is capable of any folly for that girl's sake."

"So I think."

"Then it is all fair sailing. I will open a little account with him; he will give an order. I shall experiment, cut out, try on, and then, just before delivering the goods, I will pretend to be somewhat doubtful, and ask for two or three little notes of hand, with two signatures, you understand, and promising not to negotiate them. Then we will put the youth in communication with the Mutual Discount Society; and our good friend, Verminet, will easily persuade him to write a well-known name at the bottom of a piece of paper. He will bring these notes to me. I shall accept them, and then we shall have him safe!"

"A little forgery, eh? It is not quite what I would select."

"I see no other way, however, unless—" Van Klopen paused; for an unusual commotion, a noise of voices raised in contention, could be heard in the ante-room. The tailor seemed half annoyed, half afraid, and, rising to his feet, listened with eager attention. "I should extremely like to know," he said, "who this impudent fellow is who is making a scene here. It is, of course, some preposterous husband."

If husbands hated and feared the ladies' tailor, the latter returned the compliment, for they were the bugbears of his existence. If heed had been paid to his views, the institution of matrimony would have been at once abolished.

"Go and see what it is," advised Mascarot.

"I! What! Commit myself with I know not whom! I am not quite so silly. I pay my servants to take such annoyances off my shoulders."

This was most wise and prudent. In another moment the noise decreased. The salon door was opened and shut again, and then all was still once more.

"Now let us return to our affairs," resumed the amiable Mascarot.

"Everything considered, I approve of your proposal respecting young Gandelu. I had another idea, but no matter. A little forgery may readily be made use of like a loaded pistol." So saying he left his chair, and walked with Van Klopen to the other end of the room.

After all that had been said aloud, what need could there be for this edifying couple to whisper in secret? As their conversation had proceeded, Paul had grown paler and paler. Ignorant as he was of life, he could not fail to comprehend the purport of what he had heard. Already at Philippe's, during breakfast, Mascarot had allowed him to infer that strange things were going on around him; and since then, he had been still further enlightened. It was evident to him that this man, whose protection he had so singularly accepted, was engaged in some dark and disgraceful intrigue. All his acts and words had a fixed meaning, and tended to the same mysterious end. Analyzing what he had seen, heard, or surmised, Paul instinctively divined a dark, foul plot. He divined that there was some connection between Caroline Schimal, the cook, who was so strictly watched, and the Marquis de Croisenois, at once so haughty and humble; between these two and the Countess de Mussidan, who was being driven along the road to ruin. And, moreover, Flavie, the heiress, whose hand was held out to him as a rich prize, and Gaston de Gandelu, who was to be induced to commit a crime, the consequences of which would be the galleys, were also plainly connected with the same intrigue.

And was he, Paul, to be a mere instrument in Mascarot's hands? What abyss was he being led to, what mire must he cross? This obscure employment agent and this distinguished tailor were not two friends, as he had at first supposed, but two accomplices. He realised from what sources

Mascarot derived his power, and divined how it was that he personated remorse and vengeance, pursuing his terrified victims whip in hand. And Paul realised also that he himself now belonged to this mealy-mouthed tyrant. Too late did he awaken to a sense of connivance between Mascarot and Taintaine. Too late, indeed. Although absolutely innocent, he had been so cunningly accused of theft, that his guilt seemed certain. He had trusted Mascarot and confided in him, and the agent had bound him hand and foot, irremediably enslaved him, before he was conscious of the truth—displaying, indeed, as much cunning as the huge, nocturnal, forest spiders who surprise the roosting birds and envelope them in their webs without awakening them. Could he struggle with any chance of success? No; at the least effort to break this fatal net he would be pulverised. This conviction filled him with dread; but he did not feel the noble horror of honesty for crime. To say the truth, all the bad instincts and passions hitherto dormant within him, were now fermenting like garbage in the heat of a mid-day sun.

He was still dazzled by the splendid hopes the tempter had held before his eyes. He remembered he had been told that his father was a great lord, and he thought of the young heiress, one glance from whose dark eyes had made him quiver with very passion. He said to himself that a man like Mascarot, of such great power, setting at scorn all laws and prejudices, strong and patient withal, was bound in the long run to achieve his ends. "What danger should I incur, then?" Paul asked himself, "if I altogether abandoned myself to the torrent which has already swept me away? None whatever; for Mascarot is strong enough to keep my head, as well as his own, above water."

Paul had no idea that each fleeting emotion that swept over his mobile countenance was noted and carefully analyzed by the astute Mascarot. It was by no accident that he had allowed this infamous conversation to take place in the presence of his protégé; he had decided that morning that, if he were to utilize Paul at all, the young man's timid nature must at once be brought face to face with these atrocious combinations. He had often noticed that the most subtle theories do not achieve a work of demoralization as readily as a number of broad facts abruptly stated. He read in the wavering of Paul's eyes his willingness to yield, and it was with the absolute certainty of his influence that he at last resumed his conversation with the tailor aloud. "Now," he said, "for the postscript—the serious part of my visit. Where do we stand now, with the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon?"

Van Klopen shrugged his shoulders. "Well enough!" he answered. "I have just sent her several most extravagant toilettes."

"What does she owe?"

"About twenty-five thousand francs. She has owed us much more."

B. Mascarot fingered his spectacles as if he were enraged. "Upon my word," said he, "she is really a slandered woman. She is frivolous and coquettish, but nothing more. For a fortnight I have been diligently seeking for information about her, and I can't lay my finger on the slightest venial sin which can give us a hold on her. Fortunately, the debt does that to a certain extent. Does her husband know that she has an account here?"

"He! Of course not! He gives his wife any amount of money. And if he imagined—"

"Very well, then, that is all right; we will first send him the bill."

"But, my dear sir," urged Van Klopen, in astonishment, "she paid us last week a large sum on account!"

"All the greater reason for activity at once; she must be low in funds!"

The arbiter of fashion had a thousand objections to bring forward, but an imperious gesture from Mascarot closed his lips. "Listen to me," said the agent, haughtily. "Remember what I say, and do me the favour to dispense with all remarks."

Van Klopen had lost the air of arrogance which he displayed in dealing with his fair customers.

"Are you known by Madame de Bois d'Ardon's servants?"

"I should think I was."

"Very well, then; the day after to-morrow, precisely at three o'clock, neither earlier nor later, you will call upon the viscountess. Her servants will say that she is engaged with a visitor."

"I will wait, then."

"By no means. You will insist on seeing the lady at once, and you will find the viscountess in conversation with the Marquis de Croisenois. You know him, I suppose?"

"Only by sight."

"That's enough. Don't trouble yourself about him, but draw your bill from your pocket, and, as roughly as possible, insist on immediate payment."

"What on earth are you thinking of? The viscountess will order me to be thrown out of the window."

"That is quite possible. But you must, nevertheless, threaten to carry your bill to her husband. She will order you to leave the house, but, instead of obeying her, you must seat yourself insolently, and declare you won't budge until you have the money."

"But that's atrocious conduct."

"I quite agree with you. However, the Marquis de Croisenois will put an end to the scene. He will throw a pocket-book in your face, and say, 'Pay yourself, scoundrel!'"

"And then I am to slink off?"

"Yes; but having armed yourself previously with a well-sharpened pencil, you will give a receipt in this form: 'Received from the Marquis de Croisenois, so much, in payment of Madame de Bois d'Ardon's account.'"

Never did a man look so bewildered and humiliated as the all-powerful Van Klopen. "If I could only understand," he murmured.

"That is of no consequence now—obedience is the essential point."

"I will obey, of course; but you understand that we shall lose, not only the viscountess's custom, but also that of all her friends."

"Well? What of that?"

Van Klopen was about to rejoin, when the same angry voice, which a short time before had resounded in the ante-room, was again heard; this time, however, in the lobby adjoining the consulting chamber. "It is outrageous!" cried the intruder. "I have been waiting an hour! Where is my sword? What, ho! lacqueys, come hither! Van Klopen engaged, is he? Go and tell him that I must see him at once. When he knows who it is, he'll free himself to attend to me."

These exclamations dispelled, as by enchantment, the clouds that darkened the brows of the two accomplices. They glanced keenly at each other, as if they both recognized this sharp, falsetto voice. "It is he!" whispered Mascarot.

At the same moment the door was flung open, and in burst young Gaston de Gandelu. He wore, that day, even a shorter coat than usual,

tighter and brighter trousers, a higher shirt-collar, and a more starting necktie. His face was red, and swollen with anger. "It is I!" he exclaimed. "Ah! you can't stomach it, can't you! I'm like that you know; a good fellow, but straightforward—to the point," as Achille at Vachette's says. Wait more than twenty minutes! I? Oh, no. You won't catch me at it."

This intrusion, so out of keeping with the rules of the house, almost convulsed Van Klopen with rage; but then Mascarot was present, and had given him orders to ensnare young Gandelu. Now the tailor knew that lies cannot be caught with vinegar; and so, with an all but superhuman effort at self-control, he prepared to receive the intruder with perfect courtesy. "Believe me, sir," he began, "that, had I known—"

These few words delighted the brilliant youth. "I accept your apologies," he replied, "I shan't need my sword. However, don't let us have this again. My horses are standing at your door, and have probably taken cold. You know my horses, I think! Magnificent creatures are they not? To think that Zora preferred waiting! She's in the salon now! Ah, she's very young, but I'll style her, you shall see. One minute, I'll fetch her." So saying, he ran to the lobby crying, "Zora! Madame de Chantemille! Dear viscountess!"

The great tailor seemed as much at his ease as a man on red-hot coals. What a disgrace to his establishment! He cast a despairing glance at Mascarot, who was standing near the door, but the agent retained an impassive attitude. As for Paul, he was inclined to take this young gentleman, whose carriage was waiting at the door, for a refined specimen of the graces and culture of the fashionable world, and his heart ached as he thought of what was about to befall this interesting being. He indeed felt so strongly on the point, that he approached Mascarot and asked him in a whisper, "Is there no way of sparing this poor fellow?"

Mascarot smiled one of those sinister smiles which always sent a cold chill to the hearts of those who knew him and his ways. "Before a quarter of an hour has elapsed," said he, "I will ask you this same question, leaving you to decide the point as you please!"

"In that case—"

"Hush! This is your first real test. If you are not as strong a man as I believed—good-bye. Stand steady; a thunderbolt is about to pass over your head!"

These words were trivial enough—they might mean much or little; but the tone in which they were spoken was so expressive that Paul was startled, and gathered himself together. It was as well he did so; for with some trouble he was able to stifle an exclamation of surprise and rage at sight of the woman who now entered the room. The Viscountess, young Gandelu's Zora, was his, Paul's Rose—Rose clad in a toilette which, although purchased ready made, was none the less dazzling.

She was evidently growing accustomed to her new station; and advised by her intelligent lover, would soon win a reputation for eccentricity. In proof of this she wore on her nose a pair of glasses, which she had some difficulty in keeping in position.

However, she was still somewhat intimidated, and M. de Gandelu had almost to drag her along. "How absurd!" he cried. "What are you afraid of? Come on! Klopen is only angry that we have been kept waiting by his lacqueys."

As soon as Zora-Rose was installed in an arm-chair, the interesting youth

turned towards the celebrated tailor. "Well," he asked, "have you decided on a toilette that will do justice to madame's beauty?"

Van Klopen did not at once reply. With his knitted brow and eyes fixed on vacancy, he looked like Tiresias seated on the tripod, awaiting inspiration. "I have it!" he cried, at last, waving his hand majestically; "I see it before me!"

"Ah!" said Gaston, much impressed, "what a man!"

"Listen," continued the tailor, whose eyes sparkled with the fire of creative genius. "Walking costume, to begin with; a polonaise, frogged à la pensionnaire; body, sleeves, and underskirt of full coloured maroon. Upper skirt of the *Cheveux de la Reine* tint, slashed in oval fashion. Paniers of course—"

He might have gone on speaking for an hour, Zora-Rose heard not one word. She had just caught sight of Paul; and despite her new born audacity, her terror was so great that she nearly fainted. What would come of this unexpected meeting? How could Paul remain there motionless, when she, who knew him so well, read the most savage threats in his eyes.

Her own emotion was so evident, that finally young Gandelu perceived it; but not knowing Paul, indeed, hardly noticing his presence in the room, and especially not being quick-witted, he was entirely deceived as to the cause. "Stop!" he exclaimed; "stop, Van Klopen! she is overcome with joy. I am ready to bet you ten louis that she is about to go into hysterics!"

During this scene Mascaret had kept his protégé well in sight; but now seeing him all primed for an explosion, he considered it would be absurd and unwise to prolong the trial. "I leave you," he said, turning to Van Klopen; "don't forget our arrangements. Madame, gentlemen, good afternoon."

Knowing how to leave the house without passing through the salon, he took Paul's arm and dragged him away. It was quite time that he did so.

It was only when they reached the stairs, and were out of hearing that the worthy agent breathed freely again. "Well, what do you think now?" he asked.

So painful had been Paul's self imposed restraint, so great his agony of wounded vanity, that his teeth were ground together, and he could only answer with a groan. "The deuce," thought Mascaret, "he takes it harder than I expected. No matter! The fresh air will bring him to again."

This was not the case, however; for, on reaching the street, Paul felt his limbs fail him, and was obliged to lean on Mascaret for support. The agent was sorely perplexed, when he espied a little café hard by. "Let us go in there," said he. "You must drink something to revive you." They sat down in a little salon, momentarily void of other customers, and at Mascaret's advice Paul drank a couple of glasses of rum, which speedily brought the colour back to his cheeks. "Strike the iron while it's hot," says the proverb; and the agent having stunned his man, now deemed it advisable to finish him. "A quarter of an hour ago," he said, "I promised to remind you of your views in favour of M. de Gandelu."

"Enough!" interrupted Paul in a violent tone, "enough!"

Mascaret smiled with paternal benevolence. "You see," said he, "what different views we take of things, according to the position we stand in. Now you are beginning to be reasonable."

"Yes, I am reasonable—that is to say, I mean to be rich also. There

is no necessity now for you to urge me on, I am ready to do precisely as you desire. I don't wish ever to be exposed again to such a humiliation as I have undergone to-day."

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "You are angry," he said.

"My anger will pass away, but my intentions will remain the same."

As fast as Paul now advanced, just as rapidly did the agent retreat—such are the usual tactics in such cases. "Don't decide without mature deliberation," he said; "you are still your own master. To-morrow, if you abandon yourself to me, you must resign your dearly loved liberty."

"I am ready for anything."

The agent had won the day.

"Very good," said he, with affected coldness. "Dr. Hortebize will present you to Monsieur Martin Rigal, Mademoiselle Flavia's father, and a week after your marriage, I will give you a ducal coat-of-arms to paint on your carriage panels."

XII.

WHEN Sabine de Mussidan told André she meant to throw herself on M. de Breulh-Faverlay's generosity, she had consulted the impulses of her heart rather than her strength. She recognised this fact, when she asked herself how she could keep this promise. Her whole nature revolted at the idea that she must ask for a rendezvous with any man, and allow him to read to the bottom of her soul; and in this respect she would have dreaded a stranger less than M. de Breulh, for it seemed to her, that as he had asked for her hand, he had certain rights over her, even over her very thoughts.

All the way home in the cab with Modeste, Sabine never opened her lips. On her arrival, the dinner table awaited her presence. The bell was sounding just as she entered the house. The meal was a dismal one, for whilst Sabine herself was tortured with cruel anxiety, the count and countess were oppressed by remembrance of the threats of Dr. Hortebize and the honourable B. Mascarot. In the magnificent dining room, the servants went to and fro, fulfilling their duties with the superficial attention and mock respect which habit imparts. What did they care for their master's sadness, why should they take any interest in it? Were they not well fed, well lodged and regularly paid? They cared for little else. The superb and well appointed establishment was really theirs. How many houses there are in Paris where the masters seem to be their servants' lodgers!

At nine o'clock, Sabine was alone in her own room, struggling with herself, and trying to reconcile herself to this interview with M. de Breulh. She did not sleep all night, and in the morning she felt utterly worn out; but, nevertheless, she had no idea of evading her promise, or even of postponing its fulfilment. She had sworn to accomplish it at once, and André was naturally awaiting a letter with feverish impatience. The more she studied her situation, the more imperative seemed the necessity of a prompt determination. To let things take their own way, would be to run the risk of encountering insurmountable obstacles.

A young girl, it is said, cannot be married without her consent. This is a mistake, and so Sabine knew. And she could not confide in her father, still less in her mother. Without ever having been taken into their confi-

dence, she divined that their estrangement must have some bitter cause, and that misfortune loomed ahead in the future. Already, on leaving the convent where she had been educated, and returning home, she had been conscious of being in the way—of being *de trop*. She now, moreover, had the firm belief that her parents would look upon her marriage as the restoration of their liberty. They would then be free to separate, to fly from each other to the uttermost ends of the earth. She was the only link that held them together.

Realizing all this, her anguish became the greater, and she soon reached that state of mind when young girls take the most desperate resolutions. Yes, it seemed to her less painful, less hard, to abandon the paternal roof, than to face M. de Breulh and tell him the whole truth. Fortunately, frail as she looked, she had a certain amount of energy, and by force of circumstances had learned to depend upon herself. For André's sake, even more than for her own, she was anxious to remain within the limits of social laws. Unlawful happiness, which one must hide with shame, would entail any amount of moral suffering, and provoke the sneers and contempt of hypocrites. What she longed for was that legitimate felicity which may be displayed in the open sunlight with the full approval of God and man. At noon, yet undecided as to her course, she was still weeping and praying. Ah ! why was she motherless ? At one moment she thought of writing, but she realised it would be folly to confide to paper words one scarcely dares pronounce. The time passed, and Sabine was bitterly reproaching herself for what she deemed her lack of courage, when suddenly she heard the great iron gates being opened. A carriage was entering the courtyard. Naturally enough, she went to the window, looked out, and gave vent to a joyful cry. She had seen Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay alight from a phaeton, which he had been driving himself in spite of the excessive cold.

"God has heard me," she murmured, "and in answer to my prayers has sent him here ! The worst is over."

"What do you intend to do, mademoiselle ?" asked the faithful Modeste.

"Do you intend to speak to the gentleman here ?"

"Yes. My mother has not left her dressing-room, and no one will disturb my father in the library except by his express orders. If I stop Monsieur de Breulh in the hall, and ask him to go into the salon, I shall have fifteen minutes without interruption, and that is more than I need." Then, summoning all her courage, and mastering her last hesitation, she left the room.

André might well have been proud—he, the poor painter, the foundling—to see himself preferred to the man whom the Count de Mussidan had chosen for his daughter. The Baron de Breulh-Faverlay was one of the few men outside of the official world whom Paris cared to talk about ; and this was not surprising, for he had been singularly favoured by fortune. He was not yet forty ; he was remarkably good-looking, endowed with superior intelligence and wit ; and finally, he was one of the richest landowners in France. He was often asked how it happened that he took no part in public life. "I have already enough to do," he was in the habit of answering, "without making myself ridiculous !" Was his modesty real or feigned ? No one could say. One thing was certain, that he seemed the last real incarnation of the old French nobility. His loyalty was unblemished, his courtesy chivalric, his wit exquisitely refined, and his disposition highly generous. He had had, it was said, great success with women ; however, even if the *on dit* were true, he had always discreetly refrained from compromising any one. His prestige was heightened by a mysterious cloud

which hung over his earlier years. He had not always been wealthy; an orphan, with a very insignificant patrimony, M. de Breulh had embarked for South America when he had barely reached his majority. He had remained there twelve years, sometimes fighting as a soldier of fortune, at others exploring the country, leading much the same adventurous life as contributed to the notoriety of Raousset-Boulbon, and Lindray. On his return to France, he was scarcely richer than before, but his uncle, the old Marquis de Faverlay, died, bequeathing him his immense fortune, on conditions that he added the name of Faverlay to that of Breulh. The baron had but one strong passion, and that for horses; but he showed his tastes like a true grand seigneur, not after the fashion of a groom. Such was all that the world knew of the man who held in his hands the destinies of André and Sabine de Mussidan.

He had just reached the hall, and was approaching the footmen, who had risen at his approach, when, seeing Sabine come down the stairs, he made her a deep bow. She walked straight towards him. "Monsieur," said she, in a voice that was almost unintelligible from emotion. "May I ask for the favour of a few minutes' conversation with you alone."

De Breulh concealed his astonishment under another bow even more profound than the first one. "Mademoiselle," he replied, gravely, "I am entirely at your orders."

At a sign from Sabine one of the footmen threw open the door of the same salon where Dr. Hortobize had seen the haughty Comtesse de Mussidan almost on her knees before him. The young girl preceded her visitor in utter carelessness of the conjectures and opinions of the servants. She did not ask M. de Breulh to take a chair, but, standing herself, and leaning against the marble mantelpiece, as if she feared her strength would fail her, she strove to master her agitation, and at length, after a long pause, embarrassing for both of them, succeeded in doing so. "My extraordinary conduct," she began, "will prove to you, sir, better than all explanations, how sincerely I respect your character and what absolute confidence I have in you." She hesitated, but De Breulh offered no remark. What was the girl about to say to him, he wondered; so far he hadn't the slightest idea. "You are a friend of my parents," she continued. "You have been able to form some opinion of the discomforts and unhappiness of our home. You know that, though my father and mother are living, I am quite as forsaken and desolate as any orphan—"

She paused, confused with shame. The idea that M. de Breulh might misunderstand her, and think that she was seeking to excuse herself by blaming others, revolted her pride. So, with a shade of haughtiness, which might have seemed misplaced under the circumstances, she resumed. "But I do not propose to justify myself. In venturing to ask for an interview with you, sir, it was simply because I wished to ask you—to entreat you to relinquish a project which is in contemplation, and to take upon yourself all the responsibility of the rupture."

This declaration was so utterly unexpected by M. de Breulh, that, great as was his self-control, acquired by constant intercourse with the world, he found it impossible to conceal his astonishment as well as a certain amount of mortification. "Mademoiselle—" he began.

But Sabine interrupted him. "It is a great favour," she said, "that I ask at your hands. Your generosity will spare me a bitter grief." Then, as a dreary smile flickered over her pale face, she added, "The sacrifice I ask can be but a trifling one to you. I have the honour of being but slightly

known to you, and it is impossible that you can be other than indifferent to me."

The baron looked grieved, and answered gravely, "You are mistaken, mademoiselle, and you judge me ill. I have long since passed the age at which a man lightly takes haphazard resolutions. If I asked for your hand, it was because I knew how to appreciate your noble qualities of head and heart. The man whose name you may condescend to accept will be happy above all others." Sabine's lips parted, as if she wished to speak, but De Breulh went on: "And now, mademoiselle, how have I displeased you to be so dismissed? I do not know. Only, believe me when I tell you that I shall deplore it as a misfortune for the rest of my life."

The sincerity of M. de Breulh's grief was so evident that Sabine was really touched. "You have not displeased me, sir, and you honour me far beyond my merits," she answered. "I should have been proud and happy to become your wife if—"

She stopped short, choked by her tears, but M. de Breulh was cruel enough to insist on her continuing. "If?" he asked.

Sabine turned her head away, and in a faint voice replied: "If I had not given my heart and promised my hand to another."

"Ah!" exclaimed the baron.

Jealousy, accident, or intention, imparted to this ejaculation a sarcastic tone which wounded Sabine sorely. She turned quickly, and, with uplifted head, bravely met De Breulh's questioning eyes. "Yes, sir; another—chosen by myself, without the knowledge of my family. Another to whom I am as dear as he is to me."

The baron did not speak.

"And this should not in any way offend you," continued Sabine; "for when I met him I was as ignorant of your existence as you were of mine. There is, besides, no possible comparison between you. He is at the foot of the social ladder; you stand on the highest rung. You are noble; he belongs to the people. You are proud of having a title—the world speaks of the De Breulhs as it does of the De Coucys; he has not even a name. Your fortune is beyond all your desires; he labours in obscurity for his daily bread. Yes, sir, such is his position. He may have genius, but the cares of life weigh him down to earth. To obtain the means of studying art he learned a mechanic's trade, and if you ever take his hand you will find it hard with toil."

Had Mademoiselle de Mussidan purposely wished to grieve the gallant man whom she asked to serve her, she could hardly have spoken differently. In her inexperience, she thought entire frankness would best heal the wound she inflicted. Never, however, had she been so lovely as at that moment, when her whole nature was suffused by the glow of passion. Her voice had acquired a fuller, richer ring, her soul seemed to emerge from the windows of her eyes. "Now, sir," she said, "do you understand my preference? The wider and, to appearance, the more impassable the chasm separating us, the greater must be my fidelity to my oath. I know my duty. A woman, worthy of the name, must be hope and faith, the worker of miracles for the man who loves her. I may be called headstrong, no doubt. Maybe, even, the future has some terrible chastisement in store for me; but no one will ever hear one word of complaint from my lips. For—" She hesitated for one moment, and then, with quiet firmness, added, "For I love him!"

M. de Breulh listened to her, apparently unmoved, but in reality the most fruitful of all passions—jealousy—was gnawing at his heart. He had

given Sabine a hint only of the truth: he had really loved her for a long time. It was the edifice of his whole future that she had unconsciously shattered. Yes, he was noble, he was rich; but he would have given everything—title and fortune—to have been that other man, who toiled for his bread, who was nameless, but who was loved. Many another man in his place would have shrugged his shoulders and explained Sabine's conduct with the one word—"romantic!" But he did not; his nature was sufficiently noble to understand hers. And what he admired the most in her was the frankness with which she went straight to her object, without apologies or hypocrisy; he appreciated her courage and honesty. No doubt, she was imprudent and reckless in a certain way, but even in this respect again he liked her. As a rule, the young ladies educated like Sabine at the noble and moral Convent des Oiseaux are not wanting in prudence, finesse and skill. In those days of shallow gallantry, of low and vulgar love intrigues, when the notary who draws up the matrimonial contract resumes in his person almost all the poetry of marriage, M. de Breulh found himself in face of a true woman, a woman who might inspire and share a great passion. He had hoped to make this woman his wife, and now she escaped him. Still he longed to question her, to know the whole truth, perhaps because he still retained some faint ray of hope, or perhaps, because he took a savage delight in prolonging his sufferings. "And this other," he asked, "how is it possible for you ever to see him?"

"I meet him out walking," she answered, "and I have even been to his rooms—"

"To his rooms—"

"Yes, I have given him repeated sittings for my portrait, and," she added, haughtily, "I have nothing to blush for."

M. de Breulh looked utterly confounded.

"You now know everything, sir," resumed Sabine. "It has been very hard for me, a young girl, to tell this to you—to tell you what I dared not tell my mother. What ought I to do, and what will you do?"

Only those who have heard a woman, whom they madly love, say, "I do not care for you; I have given my life to another; I can never love you; relinquish all hope"—only those few can form a just idea of M. de Breulh's state of mind and sufferings. Certainly, if he had indirectly heard of Sabine's love affair, he would never have retired. He would have accepted the contest with the hope of triumphing over the happy mortal whom she preferred to himself. But now, when Mademoiselle de Musidan personally asked his assistance and advice, it was impossible to take advantage of her confidence.

"It shall be as you wish, mademoiselle," he replied, not without bitterness. "I will write to-night to your father to give him back his promise; and it will be the first time in my life that I have ever broken my own. I have not yet decided what pretext I shall advance. I am sure that your father's indignation will be great, but I will obey you."

By this time Sabine had no strength left. "I thank you, sir," she said, "from the bottom of my heart. Thanks to you I shall escape a contest, the very thought of which filled me with dread, for I had decided to resist my father's wishes. Now, however—"

M. de Breulh did not seem to share Sabine's feeling of security, for hastily interrupting her, he exclaimed, "Unfortunately, mademoiselle, you do not seem to realize the uselessness of the sacrifice you exact from me. Permit me to explain. So far, you have been very little in society,

and as soon as you appeared, the intentions of your parents concerning myself and you were well known. Consequently you attracted comparatively little attention. But to-morrow, when it becomes known that I have retired, twenty suitors will spring up in my place."

Sabine sighed, for this was the same objection that André had made.

"And, remember," continued De Breulh, "your situation will be infinitely more difficult. If your noble qualities are calculated to awaken the most elevated sentiments, your great fortune is equally likely to arouse cupidity."

Why had De Breulh used these words, fortune and cupidity? Were they an allusion to André? Sabine looked earnestly at the baron, but she read no irony in his eyes. "It is true," she said, sadly, "my dowry is very large."

"What will you reply to the next person who presents himself?"

"I don't know; but, no doubt, I shall find some plausible reasons for my refusal. Besides, if I act in obedience to the voice of my heart and conscience, I cannot do wrong. God will take pity upon me!"

This last phrase was a dismissal, and De Breulh, a thorough man of the world, could not fail to understand it as such; nevertheless, he did not move. "If I dared, mademoiselle," he began, "if I could hope that you would allow me, as a friend, to offer you a word of advice—"

"Speak sir, I beg of you."

"Well, then, why not remain on the same terms as at present? So long as our rupture is not known, your peace is secured. It would be a very simple thing to postpone all decisive steps for a year, and I should be ready to retire on the day you named."

Was there anything concealed behind this generosity? No; and Sabine did not for a moment doubt the baron. Still she answered, earnestly, "No, sir, no, this would be taking a most shameful advantage of you, and would place you in a mortifying position. Besides, reflect for a moment, this subterfuge would be unworthy of you, of me, and of him."

M. de Breulh did not urge the point. To his first feeling of wounded pride had succeeded a certain tenderness—a plan worthy of his chivalric character had occurred to him; but his respect for the young girl was so great, that he was anxious to word it in a way that would not offend her.

"Would it," he began, hesitatingly—"would it be taking advantage of the confidence you have so kindly placed in me, if I were to express to you the happiness I should feel if I were permitted to make the acquaintance of the man you have chosen?"

Sabine coloured deeply. "I have nothing to conceal from you," she said. "His name is André; as I told you he is an artist, and he resides in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, No.—"

De Breulh made a mental note of both the name and the address. "And now," said he with more firmness, "do not, I entreat of you, mademoiselle attribute my request to mere curiosity. I have but one wish, that of serving you. It would be very sweet to me to become your ally—to count for something in your life. I have powerful friends and relatives who give large sums—" His earnestness betrayed him into a false step. With the best intentions in the world, he had deeply wounded Sabine. Did he propose to patronize André, and thus make his own superiority of position and fortune all the more apparent? No woman could stand that.

"Thank you, sir," she replied, coldly. "But I know André so well. Any offer of assistance would humiliate him frightfully. I am absurd,

you think? Excuse me, but our peculiar position requires we should be most reserved. Poor fellow! his pride and self-respect are his sole titles to nobility." So saying, Sabine touched the bell rope, wishing to bring this painful interview to a close.

A servant at once appeared. "Have you informed my mother of this gentleman's visit?" she asked.

"No, mademoiselle; for both my master and mistress gave orders this morning that no one was to be admitted."

"Why did you not tell me that before?" asked M. de Breulh, sternly; and without waiting to hear the footman's very obvious justification, he bowed ceremoniously to Sabine, excused himself for having involuntarily intruded upon her, and went off, allowing the servants to see that he considered they had been wanting in their duty.

"Ah!" said Sabine, to herself, "that man is worthy of some good woman's love."

She was about to regain her own room, when hearing a noise in the hall, she drew back. The salon door had been left ajar, and she could hear some one insisting on seeing the Count de Mussidan, despite the objections of the servants who politely but firmly refused to show the visitor up-stairs.

"What do I care about your orders?" said the intruder, "They are of no consequence to me. Am I your master's intimate friend or not? Well, then go and tell him at once that I'm here—that I'm waiting to see him. Tell him this, or I shall go up-stairs myself!"

The visitor's obstinacy was greater than the servants' resistance, and in proof of this, he succeeded in entering the salon. He was none other than M. de Clinchan, the comrade of the Count de Mussidan's earlier years, and with Ludovic the keeper, a witness of the death of the unfortunate Montlouis. M. de Clinchan was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor stout, neither handsome nor ugly. His person was thoroughly commonplace, just like his mind and his attire. There was but one thing noticeable about him, and that a trifle—he wore on his watch-chain a large coral hand. He feared the evil eye. When young, he was already of a methodical turn of mind, and as he grew older, he had become almost a maniac. At twenty, he regularly counted the beating of his pulse, and at forty, he daily chronicled full particulars concerning his digestion. If Paradise were really the realization of our disappointed wishes here below, M. de Clinchan would certainly be a clock in the next world.

For the time being he was so disturbed that he did not even bow to Sabine. "What a shock," he murmured; "and to come at this time, when I had eaten more heavily than usual. Even if I don't die of it, I shall certainly feel its effects for the next six months."

At the sight of M. de Mussidan, who at that moment appeared, he interrupted his soliloquy, and, running towards him, exclaimed, "Octave, save us both! We are lost if you don't break off your daughter's marriage with—"

M. de Mussidan hastily placed his hand over M. de Clinchan's lips. "Are you crazy?" asked the count. "Don't you see my daughter?"

In obedience to an imperious glance from her father, Sabine fled from the room. But M. de Clinchan had said enough to fill her heart with alarm and distrust.

What was this rupture he spoke of, and with whom, and why? And how could her marriage affect her father and his friend? There was some mystery, certainly, and the eagerness with which the count had checked

his friend proved this clearly. She readily guessed that the name which M. de Clinchan had been prevented from uttering was that of M. de Breulh. One of those sinister presentiments, the truth of which it would be puerile to deny, warned her that the phrase which had been so summarily dealt with contained the key-note of her destiny. She felt certain that the conversation which her father and M. de Clinchan were about to have together was destined to affect her happiness. Ah ! if it were only possible for her to hear it. She longed to do so, not through curiosity, but tormented by an anxious fear. But then, what means could she devise ? While glancing round, she suddenly remembered that by passing through the dining-room she might reach one of the card-rooms, merely separated from the grand salon by a *portière*. She at once acted on this inspiration, and, installed behind the heavy curtain, found that she could hear everything that M. de Clinchan was saying.

He was still complaining. M. de Mussidan's gesture had been so violent that he had hurt his friend and almost made him fall. "Good heavens !" moaned M. de Clinchan. "How violent you are ! Ah ! what a day this has been ! Just fancy ! to begin with, a far too copious luncheon, then a violent emotion and a rapid journey here. Then your servants must make me angry ! I see you, feel overjoyed—but you almost knock me down, and I lose my breath. Why, at my age, it's ten times more than is necessary to provoke a serious illness."

Although the count was generally most indulgent as regards his friend's oddities, he was not now disposed to listen to him. "To facts, if you please," he said, in a sharp, decided tone ; "what has happened ?"

"Happened !" sighed De Clinchan. "Only that the Bivron affair is known. An anonymous letter, which I received an hour ago, threatens me with the most frightful misfortunes if I don't prevent you from giving your daughter to De Breulh. The rascals write that they have every proof—"

"Where is this letter ?"

De Clinchan drew the missive from his pocket. It was as explicit and threatening as possible, but it told M. de Mussidan nothing more than he knew already.

"Have you looked at your journal ?" asked the count ; "and are there really three leaves gone ?"

"Yes."

"How was it possible for them to be stolen ?"

"Ah ! how ? If you could only tell me."

"Are you sure of your servants ?"

"Certainly. Don't you know that Lorin, my valet, has been in my service for sixteen years ; that he was brought up by my father, and that I have fashioned him to suit my requirements. None of my other servants ever entered my private rooms. And besides, the volumes of my journal are stowed away in an oak *escritoire*, the key of which is always in my possession."

"Nevertheless, some one evidently had these volumes in his hands."

De Clinchan thought for a moment, and then suddenly clapped his forehead. "I have it !" he cried. "Some months ago, one Sunday, Lorin went to a fête in the environs of Paris, and drank too much wine with some men whose acquaintance he had made in the train. After drinking, they all began to quarrel, and he was so ill-used by his new friends that he was obliged to remain in bed for some weeks. He had a deep stab from a knife on one shoulder."

"Who was with you while he was laid up?"

"A young man whom my coachman procured from an employment agency."

The count fancied that here was a clue. He remembered that the man who had called on him had been impudent enough to leave a card on which was inscribed, "B. Mascaret, Employment Agency for Both Sexes. Rue Montorgueil."

"Do you know," he asked, "where the agency your coachman went to is situated?"

"Certainly; in the Rue du Dauphin, almost opposite my house."

The count uttered a cry of rage. "Ah! the scoundrels are cunning," said he, "very cunning. However, my friend, if you feel as I do, and are ready to brave the storm, we two will face it together."

The mere idea sent a cold chill to M. de Clinchan's spine. "Never!" he cried, "never! My mind is made up. If you intend to resist, just tell me so frankly, and I will go home and blow out my brains!"

He was the sort of man to do precisely as he said. In spite of his many preposterous little ways, his personal bravery was incontestable, and he would ten times rather have gone at once to the last extremity than have remained exposed to constant annoyances, which would end by ruining his digestion.

"Very well, then, I will yield!" replied the count, with sullen resignation.

M. Clinchan drew a long breath. As he was in ignorance of what his friend had passed through, he had supposed it a matter of far more difficulty to bring him to this decision. "For once in your life you are reasonable," he said.

"That is to say, I seem so to you, because I listen to your timid advice. A curse on your habit of confiding to paper, not only your own secrets, but other people's as well."

Now, if M. de Clinchan was at all "touchy," it was certainly in reference to his journal—his *magnum opus* and favourite hobby. "Good heavens!" cried he, "don't talk in that way. If you had not committed a crime, I should not have registered it!"

A long pause followed this cruel retort. Quivering with horror behind the *portière*, Sabine had heard every word. The reality had surpassed her presentiments. A crime!—a crime in her father's life!

However, the count had recovered from the shock occasioned by De Clinchan's words. "What is the use of reproaches?" he said. "Can we undo the past? No; we must submit. And so, this very day, I give you my word, I will write to De Breulh and inform him of the rupture of our plans."

This answer meant peace and security for M. de Clinchan; but after all his suspense he was unable to bear such joy. From red he became livid, tottered, turned round, and sank on a sofa, murmuring, "Too copious a meal—violent emotions—it was inevitable!" Another moment and he had fainted.

M. de Mussidan was extremely frightened, and pulled like a madman at the bell rope. The servants at once rushed in from every part of the house, and behind them came the countess herself. It was only with great difficulty that M. de Clinchan was revived. He at last began to move, opened one eye, then the other, and finally raised himself on his elbow.

"I am better," he said, with a sickly smile. "Weakness—dizziness—I

know what it is, and what I ought to take. Two spoonfuls of Elixir des Carmes in a glass of sugar and water, with entire repose of mind and body."

As he spoke he staggered to his feet. "My carriage is here, fortunately. Pray be prudent, Octave;" and leaning on the arm of one of the footmen, he went out, leaving the Count and Countess de Mussidan alone together. In the card-room Sabine was still listening.

XIII.

SINCE the previous evening, that is, since raising his cane with the intention of punishing worthy B. Mascarot, the Count de Mussidan had been in a pitiable state. Forgetting his injured foot, he had spent the night walking up and down his library, puzzling his brain in vain efforts to find some means of freeing himself from virtual slavery. He felt the necessity of prompt action, for he had sufficient experience to understand that, in spite of Mascarot's protestations, this exaction was but the first of a long series which would become more and more exorbitant. Various plans occurred to him; but on reflection he abandoned them one after the other. At one moment he thought of going to the Prefect of Police and confessing everything. Then he thought of appealing to some private detective, and following his advice. But the more he deliberated, the more he realized the solidity of the net he had been caught in, and the extent of the scandal which would take place if he ventured on a plan of resistance.

Twenty hours of this sort of thing had in some degree toned down the violence of his anger, and so, when M. de Clinchan was announced, he received his old friend with some degree of calmness. The anonymous letter had not surprised him; in fact, it might almost be said that he had looked for something of the kind. The villains who held his secret had acted right cunningly in writing to his friend. They were plainly well acquainted with De Clinchan's weak character.

Now that the baron had gone, M. de Mussidan, still oppressed with gloomy forebodings, paced restlessly up and down the drawing-room, paying no heed to his wife's presence, and letting disjointed phrases fall from his lips. His unintelligible soliloquy soon irritated the countess, whose curiosity had been excited by what she had heard M. de Clinchan say. Was it not natural for her to be always on the *qui vive*, she whose position was so threatened?

"What has so disturbed you, Octave?" she asked. "Are you worried about M. de Clinchan's indigestion?"

The count had been accustomed to that sharp, high-keyed voice of her's for many years, and had borne that satirical smile with comparative composure; but this very poor jest at such a time was more than he could bear.

"Don't speak in that way!" he angrily exclaimed.

"Dear me! how rough you are! Come, what is the matter? Are you ill as well?"

"Madame!"

"Well, will you have the kindness to explain the meaning of all this?"

The colour rushed to the count's face, and his anger blazed forth, all the more terribly on account of the self-restraint he had previously imposed upon himself. He paused in front of the countess, and with his eyes flaming with hate and passion, exclaimed, "I simply wish you to

understand, madame, that our daughter will not marry Monsieur de Brœulh-Faverlay."

This utterly unexpected declaration naturally delighted Madame de Musidan. Half of the task imposed on her by Dr. Hortelize was accomplished without an effort on her part. Still, she naturally offered some objections. Women invariably begin, systematically and instinctively, by opposing even the designs they approve of. It is their way. Rightly or wrongly, they consider that resistance and argument are bound to further their views.

"Are you jesting, sir?" she asked. "How could we ever devise a more brilliant alliance? It was a piece of unexpected good fortune when M. de Brœulh came forward."

"Oh! you need not be afraid," answered the count bitterly; "another suitor will be furnished you."

This phrase, prompted by the count's intense fears, almost terrified the countess. What had he meant? Was it an allusion? Had her husband referred to the Marquis de Croisenois? Was he aware of the influence which had been brought to bear upon her? However, she was a brave woman, one of those who prefer actual disaster to unlimited suspense, and so she determined to ascertain the truth at once. "What other suitor do you mean?" she asked with affected carelessness. "Has any one come forward, and how? And besides, may I ask, who presumes to dispose of my child without consulting me?"

"I do, madame."

The countess smiled contemptuously, and the count, who was watching her, now fairly lost his head. "Am I not master?" he cried, angrily. "Am I not driven to this exercise of authority by the threats of the scoundrels who have foretold the secret of my life—any crime—and who possess the proof they need to dishonour my name!"

The countess started to her feet, asking herself if her husband had not lost his reason. "A crime!" she gasped. "You!"

"Yes, I! Ah, it surprises you; and you never suspected it. And yet it's true. You will perhaps remember that accident at a shooting party, which saddened the first months of our married life. That young man—in the woods of Bivron! Ah, well, it was no accident. I deliberately aimed at him, shot him, murdered him in fact. And it is known now; the truth can be revealed and proved."

The countess, white with terror, recoiled with extended arms, as if to ward off danger.

"Ah, you are shocked, are you?" sneered the count. "I inspire you with horror, possibly. But don't tremble, there is no blood on my hands!"

And pressing them to his heart, as if he could barely breathe, he continued, "It is here that the blood is, and it stifles me. I have endured this for twenty-three years, and even now I wake in the dead of night—I wake, bathed in sweat, for in my dreams I have heard the poor fellow's death-rattle."

Madame de Musidan sank on a chair. "How horrible!" she gasped.

"Yes; but you do not yet know why I killed him. Do you know what he dared to tell me? why, that the young wife I worshipped had a lover."

The countess started up with vehement denials on her lips, but as her husband coldly added, "And it was true—I learned the facts later," she fell back half fainting, hiding her face with her hands.

"Poor Montlouis," continued the count, slowly, "he was really loved—

He hesitated; what could be the reason of this hesitation after all he had said? Madame de Mussidan repeated his words interrogatively—"And yet?"

"Never!" he cried, with a fearful explosion of rage, "never once have I kissed that child, without feeling this horrible doubt: Is Sabine really my daughter?"

The countess rose indignantly. No, this she could not bear. "Enough," she cried, "enough! Yes, Octave, I have been guilty, frightfully guilty, but not as you believe."

"Why do you attempt to defend yourself?"

"Because it is my duty to defend Sabine."

The count shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "It would have been better to have thought of that earlier," he answered. "It would have been better to have watched over the development of her character, to have shown her what was right and noble, and to have learned to read her young heart—to have been her mother, in a word."

The countess was in such a state of agitation that, had her husband noticed it, he would certainly have been surprised. "Ah! Octave," she cried, "why did you not speak sooner—if you knew? But I will tell you everything—everything."

However the count, unfortunately, stopped her. "Spare both of us these explanations," he said. "If I have at last broken the long silence of years, it is because I know that nothing you could say now could touch or move me."

Madame de Mussidan fell back on the sofa, realizing that there was no longer any hope. In the card-room all was silent; the sobs had ceased; Sabine had had strength enough to drag herself to her own room.

The count was about to take refuge in the library again, when a servant knocked at the door. He carried a silver salver, in the centre of which lay a letter.

M. de Mussidan hastily broke the seal; the missive was from M. de Brouilh, who asked to be released from his promise. Coming after so many shocks, this proved the crowning blow. Unaware of his daughter's interview with the baron, M. de Mussidan fancied he could again detect the hand of that mysterious agent who had threatened him, and the power of those unknown folks, whose slave he was, absolutely terrified him. However, he had little time for reflection; for at that moment Modeste, his daughter's maid, rushed into the salon, crying, "Help, Monsieur le Comte! help, madame! Mademoiselle Sabine is dying!"

XIV.

VAN KLOFFEN, the illustrious "ladies' tailor," knew Paris—men and things—thoroughly. Like all tradesmen whose operations are based on a system of extensive credit, he constantly needed information respecting people and their fortunes—real and prospective. He never forgot anything he heard, and by dint of research, memory, and practice, his brain had become a perfect post-office directory. So when Mascarot spoke to him of the father of the pretty brunette, Flavia, whose beauty had so impressed Paul Violaine, the arbiter of fashion unhesitatingly replied, "Martin-Rigal? Yes, I know him; a banker."

And a banker Martin-Rigal was, to be sure. He lived in a superb house

in the Rue Montmartre, almost opposite the church of St. Eustache. He resided on the second storey, whilst his offices occupied the whole of the first floor. Although M. Martin-Rigal did not figure among the financial princes of Paris, he was, nevertheless, thoroughly respected. He mainly carried on business with those petty tradespeople, so numerous in the French capital, who only subsist thanks to innumerable shifts and devices, and remain perpetually in terror of settling days.

The banker held almost all the persons whom he did business with in the hollow of his hand, as it were. What would have become of them had he, some fine morning, taken it into his head to close his doors? They could not have met their engagements; judgments would have been issued; failure and ruin would have followed. The power he possessed was wielded by Martin-Rigal in the most arbitrary fashion. He admitted no restraint to his despotism. When he had settled on any measure, any one audacious enough to ask, "Why?" was answered, "Because," purely and simply. It was the cashier who made this reply, be it understood; for the banker himself was hardly ever seen.

In the morning he was always invisible, shut up in his private office, and not one of the clerks had sufficient courage to knock at the door; besides, even had they done so, no reply would have been elicited. The experiment had been tried, and it was believed that nothing short of a cry of fire would have aroused their master.

The banker was a tall man, with a remarkably bald head. His face, with its high cheek bones, was always scrupulously shaven, and his little gray eyes twinkled with a restless light. When he talked, if he were in doubt respecting a choice of words, or if a wrong one escaped him, he had a peculiar hobby, that of raising his right hand to his nose. His urbanity was perfect. He said the cruellest things in a honied tone, and invariably escorted to the door, with repeated apologies and bows, the unlucky applicant whom he had refused to oblige with a small loan. Despite his years, he dressed with youthful elegance, after the fashion of the rising financial school. Apart from business, he was said to be amiable, obliging, and even witty. It was reported, moreover, that he in no wise despised those good things of life which enable us to travel through this vale of tears. He by no means turned up his nose at a good dinner, or turned his back on a young and pretty face. He was, however, a widower, and had but one serious passion in the world—his only child—Flavia. It is true that in his passion there is one fanatical trait—that of the Indian who crushes everything under his idol's chariot-wheels, and is even prepared to immolate himself.

M. Martin-Rigal did not keep up a very expensive establishment; but in the neighbourhood it was said that Mademoiselle Flavia's teeth were sharp enough to crunch millions. The banker himself always walked, it was more healthy, he said; but his daughter had a carriage and two fine horses to drive in the Bois under the protection of a duenna, half companion, half relative, who was somewhat touched in the head. Flavia's father had never yet ventured to deny her anything. Sometimes a kind friend pointed out to him that this perpetual adoration might ill fit Flavia for the future; but upon this point he was intractable, and invariably replied that he knew what he was doing; and that, if he worked like a dog, it was simply that his daughter might have all she needed, and a great deal more besides.

It is certain that he did more work than all his employes put together. After remaining since early morning at his desk, busy with figures, at four

in the afternoon he would open the door of his private room, and grant audience to all who might wish to see him.

Thus it happened that a couple of days after Paul and Flavia had met in Van Klopen's *salon*, at about half past five o'clock, M. Martin-Rigal sat in his private office listening to one of his clients. She was pretty, very pretty, young, and dressed with charming simplicity; but she looked very sad, and her beautiful eyes were brimful of tears. "I must acknowledge to you, sir," she was saying, "that if you refuse to renew this note, we are ruined. I can manage its payment in January. I have disposed of all my jewels, and there isn't a silver spoon left in the house."

"Poor little woman!" interrupted the banker.

These compassionate words raised her hopes. "And yet," added she, "our trade has never been so promising; we have finished paying for the 'good-will,' and new customers are constantly coming in."

She expressed herself in such clear terms that M. Martin-Rigal listened with pleasure. A real Parisienne shines in a position of this kind; less easily discouraged than her husband, and more self-reliant, she keeps a steady head when he would lose his.

As he heard this explanation of a situation which he thoroughly understood, the banker nodded his bald pate, as if approvingly. None the less, however, he finally exclaimed, "All that is very well; but it does not make the endorsements you offer me higher in value. If I had any confidence, it would be in you."

"But, sir, we have more than thirty thousand francs' worth of goods in the establishment."

"I don't mean that."

He underscored these words with such a singularly expressive smile that the poor woman coloured to the roots of her hair, and almost lost her self-possession.

"Don't you understand," he resumed, "that your merchandise inspires me with no more confidence than the endorsements you offer? Suppose you fail, for instance; what would the goods be sold for? And besides, as you know, landlords have certain privileges as creditors—"

He stopped short, for at this moment Flavia's maid, profiting by her mistress's despotic power, entered the office without knocking. "Sir," said she, "mademoiselle wants you at once."

The banker rose immediately. "I am coming!" he exclaimed; "I am coming!" and taking his pretty client by the hand, to escort her more rapidly to the door, he added, "Come, don't be low-spirited; we will arrange all these difficulties. Come again, and we will talk the matter over."

She wished to thank him, but he was already half way up the stairs.

Flavia had sent for her father so that he might admire her new toilette, just sent from Van Klopen's, and which, after trying on, she was immensely delighted with. The fact is, that the "Tailor to the Courts of Europe" had surpassed even his usual achievements. Flavia's dress was one of those *chefs-d'œuvre* of bad taste—unfortunately fashionable—which give every woman the same odious, doll-like aspect, and seem intended to deprive them of all natural grace and distinction. The robe in question was a mass of trimmings, puffs, and flounces, of various tints, oddly contrasted and all but revolting to the artistic eye. Van Klopen had been faithful to his system—for he has a system which can be summed up in these two axioms: First: Cut each dress in such a way that it shall be utterly useless as soon as slightly rumped. Second: Employ some cheap stuff as the main

material (this is particularly pleasing to husbands), and multiply the number of costly trimmings. More than one dressmaker has profited by the very same theories.

Flavia cared nothing, however, for the economical side of the question. Standing in the centre of the salon, where the chandelier was lighted, for night was now coming on, she was studying some new steps and turns, rehearsing, in fact, so as to show her dress to the best advantage; and she was really so naturally pretty and graceful, that Van Klopen's masterpiece failed to spoil her looks. Suddenly she turned; for in the mirror before her she had caught a glimpse of her father, who came in quite out of breath from having rushed so quickly up the stairs.

"How long you have been!" she exclaimed.

Now he had not really lost a second, and still he nervously began to apologise. "I was with a client," he said; "so that—"

"You ought to have sent him away at once."

He attempted another explanation, but she at once cut him short, exclaiming, "Never mind; but now, open your eyes wide, look at me, and tell me frankly how you think I look."

There was no need of the banker replying in words, for a look of absolute unreasoning admiration appeared on his face. Nevertheless he fervently ejaculated, "Charming! Divine!"

Accustomed as she was to paternal incense, Flavia appeared delighted. "Then," said she, "you think I shall please him?"

The "him" was Paul Violaine, as the banker knew right well. He sighed deeply, as he answered, "How is it possible for you not to please him?"

"Alas!" she answered with a pensive air, "if it were any one else, I shouldn't have a doubt, nor one of these cruel misgivings that now disturb my peace."

M. Martin-Rigal had sat down near the chimney, and now placing his arm around his daughter's waist, and drawing her towards him, he pressed a kiss on her brow, whilst she, with coquettish, feline grace, glided to a seat on his knee. "Suppose," she continued, "that he shouldn't like me. Just think of that, father! I should die of sorrow."

The banker turned away his head to conceal his sad impression.

"Do you love him really so much?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"More than me?" he added.

Flavia took her father's head in her hands and shook it gently, as with a clear bell-like laugh, she answered, "Oh, how stupid you are, poor papa! How can I compare you? I love you first, because you are my father. I love you, too, because you are good, because you always do precisely as I wish, because you always tell me you love me, because you are like the enchanters in fairy-land, you know—those old, old men with long beards, who always give their god-children everything they want. I love you for all the happiness you give me: for my carriage, my pretty horses, and my beautiful dresses, for the bright gold pieces you give me, without counting, for the pearl necklace round my neck, for this new bracelet—for everything, in fact."

The enumeration was desolating. Each word evinced her absolute, intolerable selfishness; and yet the banker listened with a smile, charmed and delighted, in a state of unreasoning beatitude. "Well, and why do you love *him*?" he asked.

"Because," said Flavia, suddenly becoming very serious—"because I love him; first, because he is himself, and then—and then—I love him!"

Her tone revealed such intensity of passion, that the poor father with difficulty restrained a gesture of despair.

She saw the expression of his face, and burst out laughing. "You are jealous, I do verily believe," she exclaimed, in the tone a parent adopts towards a child who has committed some trifling fault. "Fie for shame! That's very naughty, sir! You don't even like that window, because I first saw Paul from it. That's very wrong, very bad indeed!"

Still, like a scolded child, the father dropped his head.

"Ah! well," resumed Flavia, "I love that window, for it recalls to me the strongest, sweetest emotion of my life. It was four months ago, and yet, father, it seems to me as if it were only this morning. I had gone to the window, without a motive—purely by chance—yes, chance, and yet we are told we are the masters of our own destinies. What utter nonsense! I looked out carelessly enough, when suddenly, in a window of the house over the way, I saw him. It was absolutely like a flash of lightning. That one second decided my life. I, who never felt a thrill here before"—and, so saying, she laid her hand on her heart—"now felt the most intolerable pain, 'twas like a red hot iron."

The banker seemed to be in agony, but his daughter saw nothing of it. "All day long," she continued, "it seemed to me as if there were no air to breathe; as if there were an immense weight on my heart, and a band of iron round my head. It was not blood that circulated through my veins, but liquid fire. At night I could not sleep, I shivered with cold, I was bathed in sweat; and, without knowing why, I felt frightened."

The banker shook his head sadly. "Flavia, poor, dear, foolish child!" he said, "why did you not confide in me then?"

"I wanted to do so, papa, but I was afraid."

M. Martin-Rigal raised his eyes in mute surprise to the ceiling as if calling on heaven to witness that this fear of his child was utterly without foundation.

"You don't understand it!" said Flavia. "You are the best of fathers, but you are a man. Ah! if I had a mother she would understand."

"Ah! what could your poor mother have done that I have omitted?" sighed the banker.

"Nothing, probably; you may be right, for there are days when I hardly understand myself; and yet I have been very, very firm and courageous since then, for I swore to myself that never again would I open that window. For three days I resisted every temptation, on the fourth, I looked out, and there he was, leaning with his forehead against the window-pane, and looking so sad, that I turned away and began to cry."

The banker, the hard-hearted man of business, whom a luckless client's misfortunes had never touched, had his eyes full of tears.

"After that," resumed Flavia in a softer voice, "I resisted no longer. Why struggle against destiny? Each day I went to the window. It did not take me long to discover what he was doing. I soon found that he was giving lessons to two tall thin girls I had often seen in the street. Poor fellow! I watched him each day as he went in and came out of the house. Ah! papa, if you only knew how sad he looked; sometimes he was so pale, and seemed so weak, that I asked myself if he were not almost starving! Think of it! He suffering with hunger, and I so rich! I learned the meaning of

each expression in his face, and found, when he was happy, he made this gesture," and, so saying, she imitated one of Paul's movements with which all his acquaintances were familiar.

"But one day, alas!" she resumed, "he disappeared. For a whole day I remained at that window, waiting and hoping—all in vain. Then I fell ill, as you know, and told you everything, and said besides, that I would never marry any other man."

It was in gloom and sadness that the banker listened to this narrative, which was by no means new to him.

"Yes," he murmured, "it all happened just as you say. You were ill, and as I thought dying, when I promised that I would find out who this young fellow was—"

With a joyful impulse, Flavia flung her arms round her father's neck and pressed kiss after kiss on his forehead. "And it was like that," she exclaimed, "that you cured me! And you will keep your word, dear papa, will you not? Darling! I love you more for this than for anything else in the world. And, to think that, that very day, merely with the information I gave you, you went in search of my mysterious artist!"

"Alas! my child, I am your slave!"

Flavia drew herself up, and gaily shaking her dainty little fist at her father: "What does that 'alas!' mean, sir?" she asked, with a pretty affectation of sternness. "Do you regret your goodness and obedience?"

He did not answer, for she was correct in her surmises.

"I would give my prettiest necklace," cried Flavia, "to know what means you took to find out all about him, for you never gave me any particulars. Come, don't hide anything. How did you discover him, and how do you intend to bring him here without arousing his suspicions?"

Her father smiled a kindly smile. "That is my secret, little one," he answered.

"Very well; keep it. After all, I care little for the means now that I know that you were successful; for to-night—just think of it—to-night, perhaps in an hour, perhaps in a few minutes, Dr. Hortebize will bring him here, and he will sit at our table, where I can look at him at my ease. I shall hear him speak—"

"Silly little girl," interrupted the banker. "Unhappy child."

She looked at him and answered, earnestly: "Silly—perhaps so; but why do you call me unhappy?"

"You love him too much," said her father with profound conviction, "and he will take advantage of it."

"Ah!" replied Flavia, with all the sincerity of passion, "he, take advantage? Never!"

"I hope to God, my darling, that my presentiments deceive me. But he is not the sort of man I intended for you. He is an artist—"

Flavia now really angry, rose from her father's knees. "And is that anything against him? An artist! Judging by your tone, one would think that a crime. Why don't you reproach him with his poverty as well. He is an artist, to be sure, but he is a genius. I can see that in his face. He is poor, I know; but I am rich enough for both. He will owe everything to me—so much the better then. When my fortune is his, he will not be compelled to give pianoforte lessons, he will be able to make a worthier use of his talents. He will write operas, like those of Félicien David, like that beautiful *Desert*, operas more beautiful than Gounod's. They will be performed, and the theatres will be crowded. And I shall be in my box,

glorying in the choice of my heart. His poetry will belong to the world no doubt, but the poet will be my own. And if I choose, he shall sing his divine songs for me alone."

She was in a state of such extraordinary exaltation, and seemed so convinced of the reality of the scene her words had conjured up, that the excitement brought on a cough which seemed to rend her delicate chest.

Her father looked at her with an expression of intense grief. Flavia's mother had been carried away at twenty-four by that pitiless malady, popularly known as a "galloping consumption," which is the despair of modern science, and which in less than a month transforms a blooming young girl into a corpse. "Are you in pain, Flavia?" asked the banker, in a tone which betrayed the anxiety he felt.

"I in pain?" she rejoined, with an ecstatic look. "Can joy hurt me?"

"By the sun in heaven," cried Martin-Rigal, with a threatening gesture, "if that wretch ever makes you shed a tear, he is a dead man!"

The girl was startled at the fierceness of his tone. "What is the matter, dear father?" she asked. "What have I said to make you so angry?"

"Why do you call Paul a wretch?"

"Because," answered the banker, unable to restrain himself—"because I tremble for you. He has robbed me of my child's heart, and I can only forgive him if you live even more happily with him than with your old father. I am frightened, because you do not know him, whilst I do. From the hour when you pointed him out to me in the crowd, all my friends, all the people who are under obligations to me, have watched him. From that moment spies have followed him night and day. I have not been satisfied with learning every particular of his present life; I have also made inquiries respecting his past. He has hardly had a thought I have not learnt, hardly uttered a word that has not been brought to me. I have studied him faithfully, or rather my friends have studied him with the greatest possible care; so that he has not a secret at the bottom of his conscience which we do not know of."

"And have you found nothing against him?"

"No, nothing! Only, remember this, he is weaker than the veriest twig that grows, and more inconstant than the withered leaf blown by the faintest breeze! No, nothing! But he is one of those neutral characters, as undecided for good as for evil, who go wherever they are bid, without aim, energy or will."

"So much the better. My will will be his."

Her father smiled drearily. "You are mistaken, my daughter, as many another woman has been before you. You all think that weak characters—those that are timid and vacillating—are easily governed. Let me tell you that this is a great mistake. It is only strong characters that can really be influenced; it is only upon solid foundations that we lean for support. Close your hand on a bit of marble, close it firmly, and it is still there; but do the same with a handful of sand, and it slips through your fingers."

Flavia did not open her lips; her father drew her again gently on his knees. "Listen to me, little one—to your old father," he said solemnly; "you will never have a better friend than he. You know that every drop of blood in my veins would be gladly shed if it could do you any good. Paul is coming; be prudent. Guard yourself against a momentary illusion, a passing fancy—"

"Oh! papa."

"Very well; but heed what I say. Remember that your happiness do.

pend upon your conduct now. Be careful and hide your feelings. Do not let them be suspected. Men are so made that, while finding fault with women for their duplicity, they complain still more of their frankness. Trust in my experience; remember that absolute security kills a man's love, and even a woman's."

He stopped short, for the sound of a bell was heard—that of the door of their apartments. Flavia's heart gave a great leap, and her whole body vibrated like the bell itself. "It is he!" she gasped; and making a great effort to regain composure, she added, "I will obey you, dear father; I will not appear until I have recovered my self-control and our other guests have arrived. Don't be anxious; I intend to prove to you that your daughter can be as good an actress as other women."

She fled as the door of the *salon* opened; but it was not Paul who entered. The first arrivals were friends of the house—a stout manufacturer and his wife, exquisitely dressed, but otherwise totally insignificant. That evening the banker had invited a party of twenty. A great dinner more easily explained and justified Paul's invitation.

At that very moment, B. Mascarot's protégé was ringing at the door of Dr. Hortebize, who was to act as his sponsor regarding his introduction into society. Paul had just left the hands of a fashionable tailor, and it was this that had delayed him. Thanks to Mascarot's influence, this tailor had, in forty-eight hours, prepared one of these evening suits, the mere aspect of which is more conducive to matrimonial success than anything the most enamoured suitor could say. The glossiness of the material, the faintness of the cut, in fact, the perfection of the whole "got-up" greatly enhanced Paul's natural good looks and air of distinction. He was, perhaps, somewhat ill at ease in this elegant attire; but at his age, or rather at the age he seemed to have, his embarrassment might easily be mistaken for timidity, and this made him appear even additionally interesting.

At all events he looked so well, so prepossessing, that, on seeing him, the doctor smiled approvingly. "Flavia's taste is to be decidedly commended," he murmured. And then, interrupting Paul, who was apologizing for being so late, he added aloud, "There is no harm done. Sit down; I will be ready in a moment."

Hortebize went into his dressing-room, while Paul Violaine let himself fall on to the lounge. He was utterly worn out with fatigue—for five nights he had had no sleep. Each night he had been seized with fever, and had risen and paced his room, a prey to anxiety and mental torture. This cannot be wondered at; for his situation was most unexpected, most incredible. His honesty, which he had so boasted of to Rose, had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. When, on leaving Van Klopen's, Paul had said to Mascarot, "I am yours," he had but obeyed the impulse of wounded vanity. He had, moreover, been dazzled by Mascarot's mysterious power, and Flavia's beauty, and fascinated by the millions of dowry she was reported to have; but in the evening, when again alone, he was terrified at the remembrance of his imprudence, and thought with dread of the demands which might be made upon him. What mysterious designs was he to further? Would he ever recover his liberty, his self-control? However, on the following day he dined with Mascarot at Hortebize's residence, and the certainty of the doctor's complicity had decided him to stifle the last lingering qualms of conscience. It is often thus; according to its sphere, vice, or crime even, becomes a temptation or a

lesson. When it is low, vulgar, and coarse, it repels one, and hesitating honesty wins the day. But wealthy, witty, fortunate and triumphant, it rouses in feeble minds a furious longing, fanned by the hope of impunity.

The doctor's luxurious abode and surroundings, his air of a man of the world, his ingenious paradoxes and contempt of the law were bound to complete the work of corruption which worthy B. Mascarot had begun. "I should be a fool," thought Paul, "if I hesitated or struggled any longer, when this physician, whom I see rich, happy, and respected, has no scruples whatever."

He would have hesitated, however, had he known what was enclosed in that gold medallion which dangled on the watchguard of his new associate and patron. But this Paul could not know, admitted as he was for the first time to the doctor's magnificent apartments, which comprised the whole first floor of a fine old house in the Rue de Luxembourg near the Madeleine. In the very ante-chamber, a visitor could divine that this was the abode of some aimable egotist, some witty epicurean, who considered that the time and money spent in feathering his nest was by no means thrown away. "I mean to be lodged in the same style," Paul had murmured to himself, with jealousy gnawing at his heart.

He was still reclining on the lounge when the doctor re-appeared, as carefully attired as was always his wont when he was going into society. "I am ready," he said to Mascarot's protégé, now in some measure his own. "Come, we shall arrive just in the nick of time."

The doctor's "pill box," drawn up by a superb trotter, was waiting at the door, and as Paul settled himself comfortably inside, he inwardly reflected, "I will have a brougham of my own like this."

However, if the young fellow forgot the present for the future, the doctor who had received his instructions, was on the *qui vive*. "Come, let us have a few words of conversation now," he said, as the carriage rolled rapidly along. "You are now offered an opportunity such as rarely falls in any young man's way, no matter what his social connections may be; you must take advantage of it. Don't let the chance slip."

"Oh, you may rely on me," replied Paul, with a self-satisfied smile.

"Bravo! my dear boy; I admire your youthful audacity, only you must allow me to fortify it with my experience. And to begin with, do you really know what an heiress is?"

"I think—"

"Let me speak, please. An heiress—and still more if she is an only child—is generally an extremely disagreeable young person, headstrong, capricious, and filled with a sense of her own importance. She is completely spoiled, moreover, by the adulation she has been accustomed to from infancy. Certain of suitors because of her dowry, she thinks she may do everything she pleases."

"Oh!" said Paul, singularly crestfallen by this description. "Are you sketching Mademoiselle Flavia's portrait?"

The doctor laughed frankly enough. "Not precisely," he answered, "only I ought to warn you that our heiress has her fancies and whims. For instance, I believe she is quite capable of doing anything to turn a suitor's head, simply with the object of ultimately rejecting him, and enjoying his disappointment."

Paul, who had so far seen only the bright side of his adventure, was overwhelmed on learning that the medal had two sides, a point which he

had not once thought about. "If it be like that," he said sadly, "what is the use of introducing me?"

"Why, so that you may succeed. Haven't you everything requisite for success? It may be that Mademoiselle Flavia will receive you with extreme cordiality, nevertheless don't draw any favourable conclusions from this. Even if she should fairly throw herself at your head, I should still say beware; it may only be a snare. Between ourselves, a girl who possesses a million is quite excusable in trying to find out whether you have lost your heart to her money or herself."

The carriage stopped; they had reached the Rue Montmartre. After giving his coachman orders to return at midnight, the doctor, with his protégé, entered the house. Paul was so perturbed that he with difficulty drew on his gloves.

There were some fifteen persons present when the footman announced Dr. Hortobize and Monsieur Paul Violaine. However much the banker may have disliked the man his daughter had chosen, there was no indication of it in his reception. After pressing the hand of his old friend, the doctor, he thanked him most effusively for having brought such a talented and desirable acquaintance as M. Violaine. This reception in some degree restored Paul's self-possession. But he tired his eyes in vain, in trying to perceive Mademoiselle Martin-Rigal. The dinner hour was seven o'clock; and it was only some five minutes beforehand that Flavia appeared, to be at once surrounded by the other guests. She had succeeded in concealing all her feelings, and no matter what may have been her inner thoughts, she looked at Paul with an air of utter indifference as he bowed before her. Her father was delighted, for he had by no means anticipated so much self-possession. But Flavia had thought much of his last words, and had recognised their justice. Seated at some distance from Paul, she courageously abstained from even one glance in his direction during the meal.

It was only after dinner, when the whist tables were made up, that she ventured to approach him, and in a voice that trembled, despite all her efforts, ask him to kindly play on the piano a few of his own compositions. Whatever may have been Paul's proficiency as a composer, he was by no means a remarkable performer, and yet Flavia listened to him with an air of beatitude as if some celestial sympathy resounded through the room. Seated side by side, M. Martin-Rigal and Dr. Hortobize watched her with kindly solicitude.

"How she loves him!" murmured the banker; "and yet we really know nothing of the effect she has produced upon him."

"Pshaw! Mascarot will draw it all out of him to-morrow."

The banker made no reply, and the doctor resumed, "Now I think of it, poor Mascarot has a full day's work before him. At ten o'clock, there's the council general, Rue Montorgueil, when we hope to find out what's at the bottom of Catenac's bag. I am curious, too, to learn what the Marquis de Croisenois will say when he discovers what is expected of him."

Meanwhile the hour was growing late, and the guests were gradually retiring. The doctor made a sign to his protégé, and they left together. Flavia, as she had promised, had played her part so well, that Paul asked himself whether he might hope or not.

XV.

WHENEVER B. Mascarot called his partners together in solemn council, Beaumarchef was in the habit of arraying himself in his best clothes. Not merely on such occasions was he often called into the private room to answer questions, and thus desired to appear to the best advantage, but, moreover, as a retired sub-officer, he had a great respect for rank, and realised what was due to his superiors. He reserved, therefore, for these great occasions his most superb trousers of the hussar pattern, with a black frock-coat showing both his chest and waist to advantage, and a pair of high boots, garnished with gigantic spurs. Moreover, he was particularly careful to stiffen the points of those long moustaches of his, which in their time had pierced so many feminine hearts.

On this particular occasion, however, the sub-officer, although he had received due notice of the expected meeting, still wore his everyday clothes at nine o'clock A.M. He was seriously distressed thereto, and only consoled himself by constantly repeating that his irreverence was entirely involuntary. It was the truth, moreover; for at daybreak he had been roused to make out the bills of two cooks, who, having found situations, were about to leave the establishment which Mascarot had organised for servants out of place. As soon as this was settled, he hoped to have time to array himself; but just as he was crossing the court-yard, whom should he meet but Toto-Chupin, arriving to report himself. Beaumarchef at once went with him into the outer office, thinking, no doubt, that the youngster's report would, as usual, only be a matter of some few minutes. He was grievously mistaken. There was little change in Toto's appearance. He still wore his dirty gray blouse, his old misshapen cap, and his face had its habitual knowing grin; but, on the other hand, his ideas had considerably changed. In fact, when the ex-sub-officer asked him to state briefly what he had done on the previous day, Toto unexpectedly interrupted him with a cynical grimace and gesture full of meaning.

"I haven't wasted my time," he said; "I have even made some new discoveries, only before telling you one word—"

"Well, go on."

"I wish to make my conditions."

This remark, enforced by an expressive movement of the hands, so surprised Beaumarchef, that at first he could make no rejoinder. "Conditions?" he repeated at last.

"Certainly—you can do as you please, of course; you can take it or leave it. Do you think that I am going to work like a dog, lose my sleep and all that, for a mere thank you? I am worth more than that."

Beaumarchef was exasperated.

"I know that you are not worth the salt to your bread," he exclaimed.

"All right."

"And you are an ungrateful little scamp to talk like that, after all the kindness M. Mascarot has shown you."

Chupin burst out laughing. "Kindness! indeed!" he cried. "One would think my employer had ruined himself for me. Poor man! I should like to know what this wonderful kindness is."

"He picked you up in the street one night in a snow-storm, and has given you a room in the house ever since."

"A kennel, you might call it."

"He gives you your breakfast and your dinner every day—"

"I know that, and half a bottle of wine at each meal that has been so well watered that it can't even stain the table-cloth!"

"You are an ungrateful boy," rejoined Beaumarchef; "you forget that you have also been set up in business as a chestnut vendor."

"Yes, under the *porte-cochère*. I am allowed to stand there from morning till night, frozen on one side and baked on the other; and what do I earn? Perhaps twenty sous. Come, I've had enough of that; and besides, just now the trade isn't worth a curse."

"But you know that in summer you will have all you need given to you to sell—fried potatoes."

"Thank you; I don't like the smell of the fat."

"Then what do you wish to do?"

"Nothing; I feel that I was born to live on my income."

Beaumarchef was at a loss for a retort. "All right," said he at length;

"I shall tell all that to the governor, and then we'll see."

This threat made no impression on Toto. "I don't care a fig for the governor," he answered. "What can old Mascarot do? Dismiss me? All right; I'm prepared."

"You young scamp!"

"Scamp! Why's that? Don't you think I ever eat before I met Mascarot? I lived a deal better, let me tell you; and I was free. Why, merely with begging, singing in courts, and under doorways, I made my three francs a day. We drank them together, my pals and I, and then we went off to sleep at Ivry in an old tile factory, where the bobbies never showed their noses. It was jolly there in winter time, near the furnaces. Ah! what larks we used to have; while now—"

"Well! What are you grumbling about now? Whenever you're told off to watch anyone, don't I give you your five francs every morning?"

"Just so. And I find those five francs ain't enough."

"Not enough, indeed!"

"Eh! 'taint worth while for you to get waxy. I ask for a rise and you refuse it. All right; I'm going on strike."

Beaumarchef would willingly have given a fivepenny bit from his own pocket for Mascarot to have heard master Chupin's impertinence. "You're a young rascal!" he cried. "You'll go far with the company you keep. Oh, don't deny it! A fellow named Polyte, with a shiny cap and a pair of Newgate knockers, not to mention a red scarf, came here the other day to ask after you. I'm sure—"

"In the first place," rejoined Toto, "it's no business of yours what company I keep."

"Oh, I say it for your own sake. I give you fair warning you'll come to grief."

This prediction sounded like a threat to Toto. "How?" he answered angrily; "how can I come to grief? Do you mean that Mascarot will interfere? Pshaw! I'd advise him to keep quiet."

"Toto, you young scamp!"

"But, dash it all, you're beginning to play too much of the master. 'Rascal' here, 'scamp' there, 'scoundrel,' 'blackguard,' and so on. I won't stand those names. What are you and the governor, I should like to know? Do you really take me for a fool? Do you think I don't understand your trickery? Do you think I believe all the cock-and-bull stories

you tell me? Come, come, I've eyes, and ears, and brains as well. When you tell me to watch this one or that one for a week or more, it isn't to help them home if they happen to fall. If ever I'm nabbed I know what I shall tell the police, and you'll see then that a good workman is worth more than five francs a day."

Beaumarchef was an old soldier, and a brave man to boot. He was most expert at fencing; but in argument he was easily disconcerted. Toto's surprising impudence led him to believe that the young scamp had been advised by some experienced counsellor; and if that were really the case, it was impossible to calculate the exact meaning of these threats. Not knowing how to act in this emergency, being wholly without instructions, the retired sub-officer judged it best to act prudently. "Come," asked he, "how much do you want?"

"Well! I should say seven francs to begin with."

"The devil you do! Seven francs a day! Upon my word you are cool indeed! Well, well, I'll give them to you to-day, and advise the master to increase your allowance for good; so now you can begin your report."

However, Toto received this conciliatory proposal with unmitigated disdain. "My report?" said he. "Go to blazes for it!"

"Eh! what are you saying?"

"Saying! why, do you think I'm going to open my mouth for your extra two francs? Not for Joe, oh dear no! To begin, I swear I won't say a word till you've handed me a hundred francs!"

"A hundred francs!" answered Beaumarchef, fairly confounded.

"Yes, just that; neither more nor less."

"And why, pray, am I to give them you?"

"Because I've earned them."

Beaumarchef shrugged his shoulders. "You're mad," said he; "your demand is utterly preposterous. Besides, what could you do with so much money?"

"Never you mind that. One thing's certain: I shan't spend it in buying pomade like you do, to put on your moustaches."

Impudent Chupin! he dared to attack those sacred moustaches! and so he was about to receive the kick he so richly deserved, when a noise at the door attracted Beaumarchef's attention. He turned and beheld our old friend Father Taintain. Yes, Father Taintain, the worthy old fellow, who looked much the same as on the evening when he befriended Paul in the attic at the Hôtel du Pérou. He wore the same long overcoat, shiny from long usage, and grimed with successive layers of grease and dust. His everlasting smile was on his withered lips. "Tut, tut!" he exclaimed; "what does all this mean? You were getting angry, I think. Never quarrel with the doors open."

In his heart, Beaumarchef thanked the lucky star that had sent him this unexpected reinforcement. He at once indignantly began: "Toto-Chupin, sir, pretends—"

"I have heard every word," interrupted Taintain in a soft voice.

At this news, Toto thought it best to put some little distance between himself and the old clerk. He was an acute observer, this overgrown Parisian ragamuffin. During the years that he had earned his living in the gutter, necessity had sharpened his natural powers of observation; and, moreover, by dint of having to pick his daily dupes out of the crowd, he had become no mean physiognomist, like all those whose subsistence depends on strangers' whims. Toto-Chupin scarcely knew B. Mascarot,

and distrusted him; but he thoroughly despised Beaumarchef, rightly judging that his bounce concealed a paucity of brains. At the same time he feared this sweet-spoken Tantaine like fire; for he recognised in him a spirit that would bear no trifling. He hastened, therefore, to offer his apologies. "Just let me tell you, sir," he said.

"Tell me what?" interrupted Tantaine. "That you are an intelligent fellow? I know ft. But never mind, you'll come to a bad end."

"But, sir, I only wanted—"

"Money? Ah! that is but natural; and, upon my word, you are too useful for us to think of relinquishing your services. Come, Beaumarchef, hand this fine fellow the hundred francs he wants."

The ex-sub-officer was astounded at this unheard-of generosity, and his lips parted with an objection; but he was silenced by a gesture, which, Toto, however, did not see; so having unlocked the cash-box, he produced five napoleons and offered them to the young scamp.

Toto looked at the money, then at the faces of the two men, but did not dare take the coins. Suppose they were mocking him! Suppose there was some snare! He had been so pressing a moment before, and yet now he was all hesitation.

"Take them," said Tantaine. "If your information is worthless, I shall reclaim them. And now follow me into the confessional, where we shall not be disturbed."

The confessional, as it was called in the office, was darkened by green aise curtains, and contained as furniture a small sofa, two arm-chairs, and a table. Tantaine seated himself on the sofa, and, turning towards Toto, who stood twirling his cap in his hands, exclaimed, "I'm listening."

The young scamp had by this time regained his habitual impertinence; did he not feel the hundred francs in his pocket? "Five days ago," he began, "I was told to watch Caroline Schimmel, and I know her now as well as I know my aunt. That woman, sir's, a reg'lar clock, and the little drinks she takes, mark the hours."

Father Tantaine smiled.

"She gets up," continued Toto, "at ten o'clock in the morning, takes her absinthe, breakfasts at the nearest eating house, sips her coffee, and plays a game of bezique with any one who comes to hand. So much for the day time. Then at six o'clock she goes to '*The Turk*' and stops there till they shut up, when off she goes to bed."

"'*The Turk*,' what do you mean by that?" asked Father Tantaine.

"What, don't you know, sir? that's how they call the great grub shop in the Rue des Poissonniers—and a fine place it is too. You can eat and drink and dance as much as you like there. It seems it's awfully swell inside."

"It seems, do you say? Haven't you been in then?"

Toto pointed disconsolately to his dirty blouse and ragged trousers: "They wouldn't let me in like that," said he, "but never mind, wait a bit. I have my plan."

As they talked, Tantaine took down the address of "*The Turk*." When he had finished, he looked up and asked severely, "Well, Toto, do you think this information is worth a hundred francs?"

"Wait a moment," answered Toto, making a grimace like a monkey. "Do you think Caroline can live this sort of life without money? She ain't a landowner. However, I've found out where her money comes from!"

The comparative darkness of the confessional enabled Tantaine to conceal the intense satisfaction these words caused him. "Ah!" he answered, with feigned indifference, "you have learned that?"

"Yes, and several other things besides. Just listen! Yesterday, after breakfast, Caroline began to play cards with two blokes, who had been eating at the next table. As soon as I saw the way they shuffled the cards, I knew they were old hands, and said to myself, 'Hullo! old woman! they are going to clean you out!' I was right, too; for after an hour's play she hadn't even enough coin to pay her score, and offered the landlord one of her rings as security. But he refused to take it, whereupon she rejoins, 'All right; I'll just go to my place, and come back again.' I saw and heard her; for I was at the counter drinking a glass of wine."

"And did she go to her lodgings?"

"Not she! She went out, crossed Paris as fast as a guardsman could walk, and went straight to the finest house in the Rue de Varennes—a perfect palace it was. She knocked at the door, a porter opened it, and then she went in. Of course I waited outside."

"Well, do you know who lives in this house?"

"Of course I do. The grocer at the corner told me it belonged to the Duc de—wait a minute—the Duc de Champdoce; yes, that's the name, Champdoce—a nobleman whose cellars, it seems, are brimful of gold, like those of the Bank of France."

Tantaine was never so indifferent in manner as when he was really interested. "Go on, my lad," said he. "Cut it short."

Toto, who had counted on making a great impression, seemed extremely annoyed on hearing this. "Give me time," he muttered. "Well, in half an hour or so out came Caroline looking awfully lively. A cab passed by; she scrambled in, and off she went. Luckily I've a good pair of legs, and so I reached the Palais Royal just in time to see her go into a money changer's and change a five hundred franc note."

"How did you find out that?"

"By my eyes, of course. The place was all lighted up, and I could see through the window."

Tantaine smiled pleasantly. "You know bank notes, then?"

"Yes, when I see 'em; but I never touched one. It's said they're as soft as satin. One day I went into a changer's and asked the boss just to let me take a thousand franc note in my hands. I only wanted to know what it felt like. But he gave me a box on the ears, and squeaked, 'Clear out!'—'you old beast!' says I, 'why do you show such piles of notes in your windows then? Is it to rile poor people?'"

Father Tantaine was no longer listening, "Is that all?" he asked.

"Not quite, I've kept the tit-bit for the finish. Do you know we're not the only folks who are watching Caroline?"

This time Toto had every reason to be satisfied with the effect he produced. The old man started so prodigiously that his hat tumbled off.

"What's that you say?" he exclaimed.

"I say what I've seen, governor. For three days, a big chap, with a harp on his back, has been at her heels. I didn't like the look of him at once, and right I was. He followed Caroline to the Rue de Varennes just as I did."

Father Tantaine was reflecting. "A big chap," he muttered. "A musician—hum! Perpignan must have a hand in that, or else I'm greatly mistaken—I must know what it means." Then looking at Toto, he

added. "You must drop, Caroline, my lad, and stick to this harpist. Mind you're prudent. You can go now; you've earned your hundred francs."

Chupin at once went off, and the old man shook his head. "That lad's too intelligent by half," he muttered; "he will never make old bones."

Beaumarchef was at this moment opening his mouth to ask Father Taintaine to mind the office while he went to change his clothes, but the old clerk forestalled him by remarking "Although the governor doesn't like to be disturbed, I'm going to see him. And when the gentlemen who are expected, come, Beaumar, mind you show them in at once; for the pear is getting so ripe, so ripe that if it isn't gathered immediately it will fall to the ground and rot."

With these words, Father Taintaine walked towards B. Mascarot's private room, and went in without knocking.

XVI.

It was Dr. Hortehize who was the first to arrive at the appointment which B. Mascarot had given to his honourable partners. It was hard indeed for him to rise before ten o'clock in the morning; but after all, business was business. When he reached the agency, the outer office was full of clients, whereas Beaumarchef rejoiced exceedingly; for surrounded as he was by applicants, he escaped the doctor's censure respecting his neglected attire, as well as his usual sneer, "You've been at the brandy again, Beaumar."

"M. Mascarot is in his office," exclaimed the ex-sub-officer, as soon as he saw the physician. "He's impatiently waiting for you. Father Taintaine is with him."

There was a humorous twinkle in the doctor's eyes, but nevertheless he answered with perfect gravity. "Indeed, I shall be delighted to see the old fellow."

However, on entering the agent's sanctum, he found B. Mascarot alone, as usual engaged in sorting those eternal cards of his. "Well," asked Dr. Hortehize, "what's the news?"

"There's none."

"Haven't you seen Paul?"

"No."

"Will he come?"

"Yes."

The estimable agent is generally laconic, but not to this degree.

"What's the matter?" asked the physician. "Our greeting is absolutely funeral. Are you ill?"

"I am simply preoccupied, which is excusable on the eve of a decisive battle," answered Mascarot. But he only told part of the truth; there was something more which he refrained from telling his friend. He was worried about Toto-Chupin. One flaw, and the most solid axle ever forged shivers to atoms. Toto might be the grain of sand which, gliding into the machine, stops its working and renders it worthless. Now, Mascarot was asking himself how he might get rid of that grain of sand.

"Pahaw!" said the doctor, rattling his medallion as he spoke, "we shall succeed. What is there to fear, after all? Resistance from Paul?"

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "Paul will struggle

so little," he answered, "that I have decided I shall assist at our séance to-day, although it will be a stormy one. We might measure out the truth to him like drops of wine to an invalid, but I prefer a full dose."

"The deuce you do! Suppose he should take flight and disappear with our secret?"

"He won't disappear in a hurry!" said Mascarot, in a tone which would have horrified Paul had he been present. "He can't escape from us any more than a cockchafer can free itself from the string a child ties round it. Do you understand those yielding natures like his? He's the glove, and I, the nervous hand underneath."

The doctor did not attempt to discuss the point, but blandly murmured, "Amen."

"If we meet with any resistance," resumed Mascarot, "it will come from Catenac. I may be able to obtain apparent co-operation from him, but not really sincere assistance."

"Catenac!" interrupted the doctor in surprise. "I thought you meant to dispense with his services."

"Yes, that was my idea."

"But why have you changed your mind?"

"Simply because I satisfied myself, that we couldn't deprive ourselves of his services, for if we did, we must admit some other legal man into our confidence, reveal the secret of our partnership, and" he stopped short, listened for a moment, and then exclaimed—"Hark! he's coming now!"

In the passage outside a husky cough could be heard, such a cough as usually overtakes a fat man when he passes from the cold air of the street to the warmer atmosphere of indoors. "Yes, it's he," muttered Hortelize.

At the same moment the door opened, and Catenac appeared. He either naturally possessed or had acquired that air and manner, that *je ne sais quoi* which at first sight elicit the remark, "There goes an honest man!" In fact, his appearance inspired unlimited confidence. Tartufe would not be Tartufe if he had restless eyes, a hard mouth, and a fleeting forehead, for then he would inspire distrust, and distrust is out of keeping with his character.

Thus Catenac's glance was frank and open, he always looked you full in the face. His voice too was full and mellow, and he had that jovial easy manner which always produces a favourable impression. At the Palais de Justice he was greatly esteemed for his learning, although he seldom pleaded. If he made some thirty thousand francs a year by his profession as an advocate, it was because he had a specialty. He arranged affairs which people dared not bring into court, lest they and their adversaries were alike consigned to the galleys, or at least dishonoured. Actions of this kind are begun every day in Paris. The most violent of the adversaries institutes proceedings, and the public, sniffing a delightful scandal, impatiently awaits the pleadings. But the matter never comes into court. At the eleventh hour the opponents have consulted some legal adviser of Catenac's description, and everything has been quietly settled. Catenac had over and over again brought rogues to reason, showing them what would be the result of their mutual denunciations. He had effected compromises between murderers quarrelling over their spoils, and had even had a hand in still more foul intrigues. He himself had often said, "My life has been spent amid mud and mire." In his private room, in the Rue Jacob, confessions which ought to have brought down the ceiling had been whispered in his ear.

In conciliation of this kind, the mediator naturally fixes his own terms.

The client who exposes his conscience to him belongs to him as much as the patient to the doctor, as the fair penitent to her father confessor. Thus Catenac's business was a lucrative one. The exercise of his specialty had, moreover, endowed him with a frothy, diffuse redundant style of speech, such as is essential for mediators, who, before aught else, must calm the adverse parties.

"Here I am!" he cried from the threshold. "You summoned me, friend Baptistin, convoked me, called for me, wrote to me, and here I come, all haste, all obedience, all willingness to know what you require, what you want, what I can possibly do for you—"

"Take a chair," interrupted Mascarot, gravely.

"Thanks, dear friend, many thanks—a thousand thanks; but I am in great haste. Very busy, expected on all sides, positively bound, engaged, without a moment to spare; a thousand matters on hand; matters of life and death."

"Well," exclaimed the doctor, "you can sit down all the same. What Baptistin has to say to you is quite as important as any engagement."

Catenac complied with a genial smile, but at heart he was intensely angry, and felt not a little uneasy. "What is it then?" he asked.

Mascarot had risen and bolted the door, and on resuming his seat again, he began. "These are the simple facts: Hortebize and I have decided to launch the great affair which I vaguely spoke to you about some time ago. We have an important man—the Marquis de Croisenois—"

"My dear fellow—" interrupted the advocate.

"Wait a moment. Your co-operation is essential, and—"

Catenac started up. "Enough!" he exclaimed, "sufficient, the cause is heard. If it was to propose, to offer me an affair that you wrote, asked me to call, you did wrong, you made a great mistake; for I have told you, assured you, sworn to you, repeated a hundred times"—He was already turning, hat in hand, fully determined on retreat, but between the door and himself stood worthy Dr. Hortebize, who was looking at him in the most singular fashion.

Catenac was certainly not easily frightened; but Hortebize's attitude was so significant, and Mascarot's frigid smile so threatening, that he was fairly taken aback. "What do you mean?" he stammered. "What do you wish—what can I do for you?"

"We wish, first of all," said the doctor, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that you should take the trouble to listen when you are spoken to."

"I am listening, I should say."

"Then resume your seat, and open your mind to our friend Baptistin's proposals."

Catenac's face in no wise revealed his impressions. He had so drilled every muscle, and so exercised himself in self-control, that a slap on the face would hardly have brought a drop of blood to his cheeks. However, as he sat down, he made a gesture with his right hand, which showed how irritated he felt at being treated in this fashion. "Well, let Baptistin explain himself," he said.

Mascarot's only movement had been to raise his hand to his spectacles as if to make sure that they were safely on his nose; otherwise he had not stirred. "Before going into details," he said, coldly, "I wish first of all to ask our worthy friend and partner if he is with us or not."

"Why should there be the shadow of a doubt on that point?" interrupted the advocate; "do all my assurances go for nothing?"

"Excuse me; this is not a time for mere assurances. What we now need, is loyalty and active co-operation."

"Can it be, my friends—"

"I ought to warn you," continued Mascarot, without heeding the interruption, "that in the enterprise we are starting on, we have every prospect of success, and if we succeed, it will be to the tune of nearly a million for each of us."

Hortebizo, who was not endowed with the agent's patience, now hastily exclaimed, "Come, Catenac, give us your answer is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

Catenac, as his friend suspected, was in a cruel state of indecision. He did not speak for a full minute. He was reflecting. "Well then—'No'!" he suddenly exclaimed, with a violence that betrayed his agitation. "After due consideration and proper study, having reflected and weighed every contingency—I answer you with a square 'No.'"

B. Mascarot and Hortebizo ejaculated, "Ah!" at the same moment. It was not so much that they were surprised, they rather experienced that indefinable sensation which comes over a man when he finds his anticipations, even should they be of a redoubtable character, realised.

"Allow me to explain," continued Catenac, "what you will probably call my defection—"

"Say treason—that would be more correct."

"Very well; I won't bandy words. I'll be frank."

"Oh!" muttered the doctor. "That isn't your usual style."

"But it seems to me that I have never concealed my opinion from you. More than ten years ago I spoke to you of breaking off our connection. Do you recall what I said? Do you remember my words? I said to you, 'Only our extreme need, our bitter poverty, justified our acts—now they are inexcusable—'"

"Yes," remarked Mascarot, "I recollect you mentioned your scruples."

"So you see then?"

"Only your scruples have never prevented you from coming regularly to receive your share of the profits."

"That is to say," interrupted the doctor, "you repudiated the risks but accepted the profits. You wished to win money without staking anything."

Although there seemed no possible reply to this argument, it in no way disconcerted Catenac. "It is true," he answered, "I have always received my thirds. But didn't I do quite as much as you towards putting the agency on its present prosperous footing? Doesn't it work now smoothly and noiselessly like a perfect machine? Haven't we succeeded in imparting a commercial aspect to our operations? Every month a handsome profit comes in, without the least exertion, and I, unquestionably, have a right to a third. Let things go on, quietly, at their little jog trot and I'm your man."

"Very kind of you, to be sure," drawled the doctor.

"But now," resumed Catenac, "you talk of drawing me into incalculable dangers and I cry 'Stop.' I'll have nothing to do with all that. I can read in your eyes that you think me a fool. I hope to God that events won't prove to you how much I'm in the right. Just think of it! Chance has favoured us for twenty years. What is needed to make it turn against us? A mere nothing. Believe me, it's never wise to tempt Fortune. Sooner or later she invariably revenges herself on those who, instead of paying court to her in a decorous manner, carry her off perforce."

"Oh, pray, don't let us have any sermons," pleaded Dr. Hortebizo.

"All right, I've done. Only, once more, believe me, reflect while there's

yet time. Impunity can't last for ever. Prodigious as your hopes and expectations may be, they are as nothing in comparison with the risks you run."

This cold loquacity was more than the doctor could bear. "It is all very well for you," he exclaimed, "to reason in this way. You are a rich man."

"I have enough to live on, I admit; apart from what I earn by my profession, I have a couple of hundred thousand francs, and if you can be induced to renounce your projects by sharing this sum with me, you have but to say the word."

B. Mascarot, who all this time had sat in silence, leaving the dispute to the other two, now judged it time to interfere. "Poor fellow," said he, "have you really a couple of hundred thousand francs?"

"Very nearly at all events."

"And you offer us each a third! Upon my word, you are very liberal, and we should be most ungrateful if we were not profoundly touched; only—" He paused, settled his spectacles, and then in a decided tone resumed, "Only if you were to give each of us fifty thousand francs, you would still have more than eleven hundred thousand remaining."

Cateneac burst into such hearty laughter that a casual observer would have been thoroughly deceived. "Ah!" said he, "what a pity it isn't true."

"And if I proved to you I was speaking the truth?" asked Mascarot.

"I should be greatly surprised."

The worthy agent opened a drawer, drew from it a small account book, and handed it to his partner, exclaiming, "Well, look there; there's an exact statement of your fortune up to the end of last December. Since then you have made various purchases of stocks and shares through M. T——. I have not added them to the total there, but I have a note of them. Shall I show it you?"

Now, at least, there came some expression into Cateneac's hitherto impassive face. He started up with his eyes flashing fire. "Yes," he exclaimed, "you are right. I have precisely the fortune you mention, and for that very reason I don't choose to belong any longer to your association. I have sixty thousand francs a year; that is, sixty thousand excellent reasons for not compromising myself, and I won't do so—I swear I won't. You are jealous of my success. Of course you are; but am I to blame for the inequality of our fortunes? Wasn't I as penniless as you when we began together? The only difference is, I haven't lived like you. You have been spending money on all sides; I've been economising. You have only thought of the present, while I have had an eye to the future. Hortebize has done his best to get rid of his clients, while I, on the contrary, have held on to mine, and attracted others besides; and now, because I am rich and you poor, you insist on my sacrificing everything. This won't do, my friends; it won't do! When I reach the goal of my ambition, you expect me to turn back and crawl over the road again with you, do you? Never! Go your ways, and let me go mine. I will have nothing more to do with you!"

He had again risen, hat in hand, when a gesture from Mascarot detained him. "Suppose I told you," said the agent, "that your services are indispensable to us?"

"I should simply say, 'So much the worse for you.'"

"But suppose we insist—"

"Insist? And how, pray? You hold me; but I hold you as well. Try to do me harm, and you fall with me!"

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"So sure of it, that I repeat that from this day forth I will have nothing more to do with you."

"I think you will find yourself mistaken."

"Indeed—and why, pray?"

"Because, for the last year, I have fed and clothed and sheltered a young girl named Clarisse. Do you happen to know her?"

It was not unintentionally that B. Mascarot had allowed his friend Catenac to exhaust himself in struggling as fruitlessly as a fish taken in a net. He wished to learn what were his partner's intentions, and find out what strings he might have to his bow. If he had purposely irritated him and encouraged Hortebize's ironical remarks, it was because he knew right well that an angry man allows his tongue indiscreet freedom. Now, however, being sufficiently enlightened, he had again resumed the reins.

On hearing this name of Clarisse, the advocate had started back, throwing out his arms—his eyes dilated with fright, and his whole frame quivering with a nervous spasm. "Clarisse!" he stammered; "who told you? how can you have learned—"

But the sarcastic smile on the lips of both of his companions lashed his pride so cruelly that he almost instantly regained his self-control. "Upon my word," he said, "I am losing my mind. Why should I ask these men, whom I know so well, how they learned a secret? Haven't they the most infamous methods always at work?"

"I had judged you rightly," remarked B. Mascarot.

"In what respect, pray?"

"I foresaw that the day would come when, considering yourself strong enough to stand alone, you would attempt to break the ties that unite us. To-day you wish to throw us over, and you would betray us to-morrow, if you could do so without danger to yourself. But I am ready for you."

The worthy doctor rubbed his hands together with more than customary earnestness. "That's it," said he; "nothing like being prepared."

"However, one thing I don't understand," continued Mascarot, "and that is, that you, Catenac, a man of more than average intelligence and shrewdness, should have dealt us such a fine hand against yourself. What! It only occurred a year ago; you hated us, longed to betray us, and yet you deliberately went and made yourself vulnerable! Come, it's quite incredible."

"Yes, incredible," repeated the doctor, like an echo.

"And yet your—folly, shall I call it? perhaps imprudence would be the better word—is of the most ordinary description. We see and hear of it every day. Don't you ever read the *Gazette des Tribunaux*? I saw a story in it yesterday; one might swear it was your own. An ambitious, hypocritical man of the middle classes, supposed to be highly respectable and honest, engages a pretty, buxom young girl from the country as his servant, and amuses himself in seducing her. For some months matters go on pretty smoothly; but one fine day the girl finds it impossible to conceal her situation any longer. Our good man is naturally disturbed; for what would the neighbours and the concierge say? Well, to make a long story short, the child is suppressed—yes, suppressed is a good word—and the mother thrown on the streets."

"Baptistin, have mercy!"

"It's a simple thing to do, no doubt, but an awfully imprudent one. These affairs are always found out. If Crime has its combinations and craftiness, Justice has at its service those chances which we always call

incredible, although they turn up at each step in life. You have a gardener at your house at Champigny. Suppose this man took a notion into his head to turn up the earth round the well at the bottom of the garden? Do you know what he would find there?"

"Enough!" muttered Catenac; "I surrender."

B. Mascarot adjusted his spectacles, as he always did in decisive moments. "You surrender, do you? No, not yet. At this very moment you are seeking to parry my blows."

"I assure you—"

"Spare yourself the trouble. If your gardener did as I say he would find nothing at all!"

A cry of rage escaped the advocate. He was beginning to realise what a horrible snare he had fallen into.

"He would find nothing," repeated Mascarot slowly. "And yet, it is nevertheless true, that, one cold night in January last year, you dug a hole in your garden, and in that hole you laid the body of a child, rolled up in a shawl. And what shawl? Why, the very one which you, Catenac, bought for Clarisse, when you were trying to seduce her. You thought that gift would make some impression on her. No doubt it did. However, you bought that shawl at the Bon Marché, and the shopman who sold it you will identify it, if needs be. Well now, go and look for the child and shawl, and you'll find nothing at all."

"Then it was you, you who carried them off?"

"By no means," replied Mascarot, in a tone of condensed sarcasm; "it was Pantaine. I'm not quite so imprudent; but I know where the body is—and you don't. Don't be troubled, however, it is perfectly safe; but one single act of treachery on your part, and the very next day you will find in the morning papers, under the heading, '*Paris*,' Yesterday, whilst excavating such and such a place, the workmen found the body of a newborn child, which had evidently died a violent death. Active steps are being taken to bring the criminal to justice.' Yes, that's what you'll read; and you know me well enough to be sure, beforehand, that justice will take its course. Besides poor Clarisse's shawl, I've added sufficient to the bundle for the police to find you out with the greatest ease."

Catenac's anger had given way to absolute mental prostration. This man, whom nothing ought to have surprised, seemed as if he were stunned, as if he had lost the power of reflection or deliberation. He did not conceal his despair; indeed, rather the reverse, as if he actually hoped to soften the hearts of his implacable associates.

"You are killing me," he gasped; "killing me at the very moment when I was about to grasp the reward for which I have toiled and stunted myself for twenty years!"

"That word 'toil' is good!" observed the doctor sententiously.

But there was no time to lose. Paul and the Marquis de Croisenois might arrive at any moment, and Mascarot deemed it advisable to revive his demoralised partner. "You complain as if we wished to hang you now and here! Do you suppose for a moment that we are so utterly simple as to expose ourselves to these great perils without an almost absolute certainty of success? Hortebize was almost as disturbed as yourself when I first spoke of this great stroke of business to him. However, I explained it fully, and then he was thoroughly satisfied."

"Thoroughly satisfied," echoed Hortebize.

"I really think," resumed the agent, "that there is nothing whatever to

fear for any one of us—least of all for yourself ; and I trust you won't have any resentment for what has just been said."

"Oh, I'm not angry," answered Catenac with a forced smile. "Tell me what you want me to do."

B. Mascarot reflected for a moment. "What we desire from you," said he, "can in no way compromise you. I want you to draw up an act of partnership on a plan I will tell you by-and-bye. You will have no ostensible connection with the affair."

"Very well."

"But this is not everything. You have been entrusted with a most difficult mission by the Duc de Champdoce. You are engaged in a search—"

"What! you know that too?"

"I am ignorant of nothing which can in any way serve our ends. For instance, I have ascertained that, instead of coming at once to me, you foolishly applied to the only man in the world whom we have any reason to fear—Perpignan, who is almost as clever as we are, and a great deal harder in his terms."

"Go on," said Catenac impatiently ; "what do you expect of me on this point?"

"Very little. You will simply keep me informed as to the progress of your researches, and never say a word to the duc which we have not previously agreed on."

"So be it."

The quarrel seemed to have come to an amicable termination, and worthy Dr. Hortebize looked overjoyed. "Now," said he, insinuatingly, "confess that it was not worth while making as much noise as if you were being flayed."

"I admit I was in the wrong," answered Catenac meekly ; and so saying he held out his hand to his two friends, and then with a wan smile added, "let it all be forgotten."

Was he sincere? A swift glance, exchanged by B. Mascarot and the doctor, was full of suspicion. However, a moment previously, already, a knock had been heard at the door. Hortebize rose to open it, and Paul appeared, bowing with respectful affection to his two protectors. "First, my boy," said B. Mascarot, "let me introduce you to one of my oldest and best friends." And turning to Catenac he added, "I wish to ask your kindness for my young friend. Paul is a good fellow, who has neither father nor mother, and whom we are trying to push on in the world."

At these words, emphasized by a strange smile, the lawyer started from his seat. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "why did you not speak sooner?"

Catenac was the Duc de Champdoce's confidant, and as such he now understood Mascarot's plan.

XVII.

The Marquis de Croisenois was one of the worst men in the world to keep an appointment. In fact, his lack of punctuality formed part of a system of his, and almost amounted to a mania. Perhaps he thought he might thus assert his own importance ; but in this he was very much mistaken. A man of keen perceptions doesn't trouble himself about being late or early ; his only care is to arrive at the very moment when he is expected or desired. To arrive then, and then only, is the secret of many a man's good fortune.

M. de Croisenois had been summoned by B. Mascarot for eleven o'clock ;

but it was past twelve when he at last presented himself, in yellow kids, with a glass in his eye, and carrying a switch-like cane, which he twirled with that air of familiar impertinence that fools assume when they think they are condescending to something very much beneath them. At thirty-five, Henri de Croisenois affected the youthful air of a stripling of twenty. His careless frivolity was his armour, the inevitable excuse for his greatest follies. Folks said of him after each fresh escapade, "He's a scatterbrain, quite a school-boy; but you can't be angry with him, he's so good-natured."

No doubt the marquis laughed at this in his sleeve. This amiable young nobleman had never had a good impulse in his life. He was always exercising himself in resisting his first inspirations. Under his indifferent air he concealed considerable astuteness. He had even nonplussed many a pottifogging lawyer, and had duped the usurers who had lent him money. If he were ruined, it was simply because he had chosen to live in the same style as those of his friends who were ten times as wealthy as himself—by no means a new story.

He was one of that brilliant group of *viveurs*, of whom the Count de Trémoré was long the paragon, and, like his associates, had set up a racing stable—one of the surest plans a man can devise to get rid of his fortune. The frivolous marquis soon found this out, and after resorting to all kinds of expedients, he was about to plunge for the last time, when B. Mascarat offered him a helping hand. He clutched at it as a drowning man might clutch at a bar of red hot iron. However, whatever may have been his anxieties, he still outwardly maintained an air of composure, and on the particular day we are referring to, he entered Mascarat's private office with an easy, jaunty step, and after bowing to the assembled company, exclaimed, "I have kept you waiting, but, 'pon my word, I couldn't help it; my time is really not my own, you know. But here I am at last, and entirely at your disposal; quite ready to wait until you have finished with these gentlemen." Thereupon, having held his lighted cigar between his fingers as he spoke, he began smoking again.

His manner was excessively impertinent, and yet the estimable Baptistin by no means looked offended. He didn't even protest against the cigar, although, as his friends well knew, he positively abominated the smell of tobacco. However, strong men are often patient. Something may, in charity, be granted to the simpleton whom one can crush with one's little finger. And, moreover, B. Mascarat had need of Henri de Croisenois. The marquis was an indispensable pawn in his game of chess.

"We were beginning to despair of seeing you," he answered. "I say we, advisedly, for these gentlemen are here on your account."

The marquis did not take the trouble to hide a pout of vexation.

"These gentlemen," continued Mascarat, "are my partners—Dr. Hortebize, M. Catenac, of the Parisian bar, and our secretary," here he designated Paul.

This presentation was delightfully solemn. If M. de Croisenois was annoyed at finding four confidants, when he had only expected to find one, Catenac was furious at discovering that the secrets of the society were to be abandoned to the mercy of a stranger. A secret, be it remembered, is a very subtle thing; it is more volatile than ether, which evaporates no matter how hermetically the phial containing it may be sealed. Even Hortebize, despite of his blind confidence in Mascarat, felt surprised. As for Paul, he stared and listened with all his might.

Mascarat alone retained the imperturbable assurance of a man who, hav-

ing but one object, goes straight towards it like a bullet, crashing through every obstacle, and turning neither to the right nor to the left.

As soon as Croisenois was seated, the agent began. "I don't intend," said he, "to leave you for a moment in uncertainty. Diplomacy would be absurd between such folks as ourselves."

This phrase, and especially the plural "ourselves," struck the marquis as being so extraordinary, that with uplifted brows he drawled, "You flatter me—my dear sir."

If the frivolous marquis had been more attentive, he would have remarked how B. Mascartot's spectacles jerked on his nose—a jerk which plainly implied, "You poor fool." Hortebize always asserted that the honourable agent's spectacles were gifted with the power of speech, and he was right. It is in vain that a man wears glasses with the view of concealing his impressions. Spectacles soon become part and parcel of the wearer, and confess what the eyes they hide would themselves confess were they only seen.

"I must first tell you, Monsieur le Marquis," resumed Mascartot, "that your marriage is now a certainty, providing my partners and myself agree to help you. We are certain of the Count and Countess de Mussidan's assistance; the only point in abeyance is the young lady's consent."

Croisenois shrugged his shoulders with an air of superb conceit. "Oh! there'll be no difficulty about that," he answered. "I can answer for it. Each epoch has its temptations, and I'm expert in those of nowadays. I will promise the finest horses in Paris, a box at the Opera, unlimited credit at Van Klopen's, and absolute liberty. No young girl could ask for more. Yes, I shall succeed, depend upon it. Of course, I must be presented and backed by some one whom she likes, and who enjoys a certain influence with her parents."

"Do you think the Vicomtesse de Bois d'Ardon would be a suitable patron?"

"I should think so; she is a relative of the count's."

"Very well, then, on the day we decide Madame de Bois d'Ardon will support your pretensions and sing your praises."

The marquis looked triumphant. "All right!" he exclaimed; "that decides the matter."

Paul asked himself if he were quite awake. He had been promised a rich wife, and here was another man who seemed to be cared for in the same way. "These people," he said to himself, "besides keeping an ordinary employment office for servants of both sexes, seem to have a matrimonial agency as well."

Meanwhile the marquis gave Mascartot a questioning glance, as if he were hesitating to say something he had on his mind. "Oh! speak out!" exclaimed the worthy agent; "we are among friends."

"It only remains now, then," resumed the marquis, "to fix the amount of—the—commission, shall I call it?"

"I was about to broach that question."

"Very well, then. As I have already told you, I will give you a quarter of the dowry; the day after the wedding I will hand you a due bill for that amount."

Paul now thought he had a glimmer of light. "I see," said he to himself; "if I marry Flavia, I must share her dowry with these honest gentlemen. I now understand why they take so much interest in me."

But the offer made by the marquis did not seem to satisfy Mascartot. "No; that will not do."

"Not do? Well, then, I will add to that the amount of my debt to you."

B. Mascarot shook his head, to the great despair of Croisenois, who resumed, "You want a third of the dowry? Well, take it then."

"No," said Mascarot, "it is not a third—no, nor even the half—the entire dowry would not do. You may keep the whole of it, and also the amount of your debt to us, if we can arrange everything as I desire."

"Well, what do you want? For heaven's sake, speak!"

Mascarot assured himself that his spectacles were all right. "I will speak," he answered; "but, first of all, it is absolutely necessary I should give you a brief history of the association I preside."

So far, Catenac and Hortebize had listened without moving, as grave and silent as Roman senators on their curule chairs. They thought they were assisting at one of those comedies which B. Mascarot had accustomed them to—comedies in which the catastrophes varied, although they were always fatal. They took much the same pleasure in listening to the discussion as they would have taken in watching a cat play with a mouse before devouring it. But when B. Mascarot announced that he was about to disclose their dangerous secret, they both started to their feet in mingled anger and dismay. "Are you mad?" they cried together.

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "Not yet," he answered calmly; "and I beg you to allow me to continue."

"But you have no right—at least," stammered Catenac, "we have a voice in the decision."

"Enough!" exclaimed Mascarot angrily; "I am the head of our society, am I not?" And in a tone of bitter irony he resumed, "Do you think we cannot speak openly before the marquis?"

As the physician and the lawyer sank back in their chairs in a resigned sort of way, Croisenois thought it politic and conducive to his own interests to try and reassure them. "Between honest folks—" he began.

"But we are not honest," interrupted Mascarot; and then, in answer to the marquis's air of stupefaction, he looked him full in the face and added in a crushing tone, "nor are you either!"

This brutal language brought the blood to the marquis's brow. The rules of good society do not allow people to say face to face precisely what they think of each other. He had more than half a mind to show his anger, but policy prevailed; he could not throw away that chance of future wealth which Mascarot offered him; so, bowing his head under the insult, he pretended to regard it as a joke. "Your paradox," he said, "is somewhat rough."

But the worthy agent took no notice of this moral cowardice, which brought a smile to the doctor's lips.

"I shall be obliged to you, Monsieur le Marquis," continued Mascarot, "if you will lend me all your attention;" and then turning to Paul he added, "and you, too, my dear fellow."

There ensued a moment of almost solemn silence, and the buzz of voices in the outer office could be heard through the closed door. If Hortebize and Catenac were confounded, Croisenois was so stupefied that he allowed his cigar to go out, and Paul shuddered in advance. Mascarot seemed utterly transfigured. He had nothing left of his usual benignant look. The sense of power seemed to have added to his height, and his spectacles literally flashed. "My partners and I, Monsieur le Marquis," he began, "have not always been what we are nowadays. Twenty-five years ago we were young, we were honest—all the illusions of our youth were in full

force; we had that faith which sustains through every trial; we had the courage which inflames the soldier as he marches to the assault. We lived, all three of us, in a miserable garret in the Rue de la Harpe, and we loved each other like brothers."

"How long ago it was!" muttered Hortebize. "How long ago!"

"Yes, it is long ago," continued Mascarot; "and yet the lapse of years does not prevent me from seeing things as they were, and my heart aches as I compare the hopes of those times with the realities of to-day! We were poor then, marquis, very poor; and yet the world encouraged us with vague promises and approval. The managers of all those establishments consecrated to the development of nascent talent had murmured in the ears of each of us those magic words: 'You will succeed—*tu Marcellus eris!*'"

Croisenois repressed a smile. He did not find the story exciting. "You understand Latin, I see," he said condescendingly.

"I understood it once, at all events. As I was saying, each of us anticipated a brilliant destiny. Catenac had received a prize for his thesis on 'The Transmission of Property.' Hortebize had written an essay on the analysis of poisons that had met with the approval of the illustrious Orfila, and I was by no means without my successes, having just passed my examination for the degree of 'Doctor of Sciences and Letters.' Unfortunately, Hortebize was on bad terms with his family; Catenac's people were poor; and I—well, I had no family—I stood alone. We were, therefore, slowly but surely dying of hunger. I was the only one of the three who earned a penny. I prepared pupils for the examinations of Saint Cyr and the Polytechnic School. For thirty-five sous a day I endeavoured to cram the principles of geometry and algebra into the brains of a number of young fellows who poked fun at my rusty clothes and my excessive thinness. Thirty-five sous! There were three of us to feed, and besides, I had a mistress whom I passionately loved, and who was dying of consumption."

Who would have ever thought that, of that blue-spectacled sphinx, B. Mascarot!

"But to the point," he resumed. "A day came when between us three we could not raise a halfpenny; and Hortebize had just confessed to me that for lack of substantial food, meat and wine, my poor Marie would die. 'Well,' cried I, 'wait for me, my friends; I'll find some money somewhere.' So saying, and without knowing where I was going, I rushed from the house! I was half mad! I asked myself if I had better beg for a few sous, or spring at the throat of the first man I saw and demand his purse? I wandered along the quays, talking incoherently all the while. All at once I had a gleam of light. I remembered that it was Wednesday, the half holiday of the Polytechnic School, and I said to myself that if I went to the Café Lemblin or the Palais-Royal, I might, no doubt, find one of my old pupils who would, perhaps, lend me a five franc piece. A five franc piece! It wasn't much, eh, Monsieur le Marquis? but that day it represented the life of my beloved Marie, the life of my friends, and my own. Have you ever suffered from hunger, Monsieur le Marquis?"

Croisenois started. No, he had never suffered from hunger; but how could he tell what the future might have in store for him—for him whose resources were so nearly exhausted that, on the very morrow even, he might have to resign his fictitious prosperity and drop to the foot of the ladder.

"When I reached the Café Lemblin," resumed B. Mascarot, "I did not see a single pupil of the school. The waiter to whom I spoke looked at

me from head to foot with profound contempt, for my clothes were in rags ; but, on learning that I was an under tutor, he condescended to say that the young gentlemen had been there, and were coming back. I said I would wait for them. The waiter asked if I would take anything. I answered, 'No,' and sat down in a corner.

"My brain had been on fire ever since leaving home, but for the moment I was comparatively happy, for I had a gleam of hope. Among the names the waiter had mentioned were those of two young fellows whom I had always found courteous and obliging, and whom I thought I could depend upon in this cruel emergency. I had been waiting some twenty minutes or so, when suddenly the door of the café opened and a man entered—a man whose face I should never forget were I to live a hundred years. He was deadly pale ; his features were contracted and his eyes haggard. He was evidently suffering intense agony, either of mind or body. I saw this instantly, and also realised that his sufferings were not caused by poverty. When he dropped, as it were, on the divan, every waiter in the establishment ran to ask what he wanted. In a hoarse voice which the waiters could scarcely understand, he called for a bottle of brandy, and pen, ink, and paper."

It was a true story that Mascarot was telling, and truth makes its mark. None of the agent's listeners dared to say a word as he now paused, and on looking round he noted that even the ever-smiling Hortebize had become gloomy and perturbed.

"The sight of this man," resumed Mascarot, "in some way consoled me. We are so constituted that the grief of others is in some degree a solace to ourselves. It was very evident to me that he was suffering terribly, and I said to myself with unhealthy satisfaction, 'It isn't only the poor who curse their unhappy fates ; the rich have their share of torture too.' However, in the meantime, the waiters had placed the brandy and the writing materials in front of the new comer. He began by pouring out a large glassful of spirit, and swallowed it as if it had been mere water. The effect was sudden and appalling. He turned crimson, as if he were about to have an attack of apoplexy, and seemed all but unconscious for a minute or two. I watched him with intense curiosity ; for it seemed to me as if the voice of conscience whispered that, somehow or other, that man would be connected with my life. There was, it seemed, some mysterious link between us, and a presentiment warned me that his influence would be fatal for my future. Then a fear seized me, and I was tempted to leave the café ; but my curiosity was too strong. In the meantime, this man had recovered. He seized the pen, and quickly traced a few lines on a sheet of letter paper. What he wrote did not satisfy him, however ; for he suddenly stopped, lighted a match, and burned the paper. Then he drank another glass of brandy. A second letter proved no more satisfactory than the first one ; for he crumpled it up and slid it into his waistcoat pocket. However, he began again for the third time, and as I watched him, I saw him hesitate, then write a word, then erase one, then add another, as if he were preparing the rough draft of some communication, each expression of which required careful study. He had plainly lost all recollection of where he was ; for he gesticulated, and let occasional incoherent remarks escape him, as if he were in the privacy of his own office. At last, however, he seemed satisfied with the draft he had drawn up, and proceeded to copy it out on a fresh sheet of paper. This only took him a minute or so, and then, tearing the draft into tiny pieces, he flung them under the table.

Having carefully sealed and directed his letter, he summoned one of the waiters and exclaimed, 'Take those twenty francs, and carry this letter to its address. Bring me the answer—for there will be one—to my house. Here's my card; come, make haste.'

"The waiter hastened off, and the gentleman settled his score and then immediately retired. I asked myself what drama it was that I had just witnessed? I divined that this must have some connection with one of those dark intrigues carried on in private life. This man might be a dishonoured husband, a ruined gamester, or a father whose son had just disgraced his name. I tried to think of something else, but all in vain! The little bits of white paper scattered under the table fascinated me. I burned to pick them up, collect them together, and know— But as I said before, at that time I was honest and honourable, and such an act shocked all my instincts. I should, no doubt, have conquered temptation, but for one of those trilling circumstances which often decide a man's whole life. A door was opened, and the draught wafted one of these scraps of paper to my very feet. I was dazed and conquered. I stooped, picked the paper up, and at once deciphered these four words: '*Blow out my brains.*'

"I was not mistaken, then. I was in presence of some terrible enigma, with the means, moreover, of discovering its meaning. After yielding to this first temptation I was lost, and struggled no longer. The waiters passed to and fro, but no one paid the smallest attention to me, and so I quietly glided to the chair where that man had sat, and, unperceived, obtained possession of two more scraps of paper. On the first of them I read: '*shame and horror,*' and on the second: '*this very night—one hundred thousand francs.*'

"I had it all now. The secret was mine. These imperfect phrases were clear as daylight to me. You may ask why I troubled myself any further. I don't know; but, at all events, I certainly succeeded in finding every scrap of that letter. I fitted them all together, and then read as follows: 'Charles,—I must obtain this very night one hundred thousand francs, and you are the only person to whom I can apply, without making the shame and horror of my position public. Can you get this sum together in a couple of hours? My fate depends on your answer—"yes," or "no;" for I shall either be saved, or else I must blow out my brains.'

"You are probably astonished, Monsieur le Marquis, by the precision of my memory. Nevertheless, you ought to know that there are some things one never forgets; and at this very moment I can see that scrawl before my eyes, with its erasures, blots, and very commas. But I must continue. Below these few lines ran the signature—a well-known commercial name, almost a celebrated one. He who bore it, one of the worthiest of men, found himself momentarily unable to cope with some financial difficulty, such as often imperils a man's life and honour."

B. Mascarot paused for a moment, as if overwhelmed by his recollections. But still no one thought of speaking, and as for the brilliant Croisenois, he had long since thrown down his cigar.

"I can assure you," at last resumed the agent, "that my discovery disturbed me greatly. I forgot all my own anxieties and thought only of his. Wasn't our anguish of the same kind—he at a loss for a hundred thousand francs—and I for a hundred sous? By degrees, however, as the consciousness of my own bitter misery returned, I was seized with an infernal temptation. Might I not be able to turn this stolen secret to account? The idea was an inspiration. I rose, went to the *comptoir*, and asked for some wafers

and a directory; then, having returned to the table, I affixed my scraps of paper to a fresh sheet, looked for the merchant's address in the directory, and left the café. This unfortunate man lived in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. For more than half an hour I walked up and down in front of his handsome house. Was he still alive? Had this friend of his, this Charles, answered yet? At last I decided to go in. A footman in livery abruptly told me that his master did not receive any one at that hour; besides, he was at dinner with his family. This lackey's impertinent *mieu* fairly exasperated me. 'Well,' said I, 'if you wish to avoid a great misfortune, just go to your master and tell him that a poor devil has brought him the draft of the letter he just wrote at the Café Lemblin.' Indignation made my voice so imperious that the servant never thought of hesitating. The effect of the announcement must have been terrible; for the footman returned almost at once with a startled look and exclaimed, 'Come quick! My master is waiting.'

"He conducted me to a large, tastefully decorated study, where I perceived the gentleman I had already seen at the café. He was deadly pale, and looked at me in a threatening manner. For myself, I could hardly speak; I was half stifling. 'You picked up the scraps of the draft I had thrown away?' he asked. I nodded assent, and at the same time showed him the fragments wadded to the sheet of letter paper. 'What do you want for that?' he rejoined. 'I will give you a thousand francs.' I swear to you, gentlemen, that up to that moment I had no intention of selling this secret. In going to see this man, I had simply meant to say, 'I bring you this paper; some one else might have taken advantage of it. I have rendered you a service; in return, lend me fifty or a hundred francs.' But, as I tell you, was what I intended to say; but seeing how he interpreted my conduct, the blood rushed to my head, and I retorted, 'I want two thousand francs.' Thereupon he opened a drawer, took two notes from a pile of others, and, throwing them in my face, exclaimed, 'Here, scoundrel, pay yourself!'"

B. Mascarot expressed himself with extraordinary vehemence. No one would ever have supposed that this man, usually so calm and self-possessed, could become so excited. His usually unctuous, honey-toned voice now rang like a bugle blast through the room. He seemed no longer to be telling a story. Perhaps he was pleading for extenuating circumstances in favour of a lost cause—his own, trying to exculpate himself in the eyes of his associates, to excuse, if not rehabilitate himself before the tribunal of conscience. Paul and Croisenois trembled with apprehension as they listened to him.

"I cannot express to you," resumed the agent, "how bitterly I resented this undeserved insult. I certainly lost all self-control. I was no longer myself, and if I had committed a crime there and then, God knows I should not have been truly responsible for it. I was, indeed, on the point of committing one. The man I speak of could never have seen death so near before. On his desk there lay a long Catalan knife, used by him for cutting paper, no doubt. I snatched it up, and I was about to strike, when the thought of Marie, dying of cold and starvation, withheld my arm. I threw down the weapon, and rushed out of the house half insane. I had held my head high on entering that cursed mansion; I had felt proud of my honest poverty; but now I came away dishonoured."

With the exception of Paul, all the men assembled in Mascarot's office were well acquainted with the dark side of life; the mire of civilisation

had soiled their minds, familiarity with evil had steeled them against sensibility, and yet they could not help shuddering as they listened to this narrative.

"Let me proceed," continued Mascarot. "Once in the street, the two bank notes I held seemed positive instruments of torture. It seemed to me as if they burned my fingers. I ran with them to the office of a money-changer, who must have taken me either for a madman or a murderer. Why he did not have me arrested, I have never been able to understand. Perhaps I frightened him. At all events he changed the notes, giving me not gold—for gold, in 1843, was rare—but two heavy bags, each containing a thousand francs in silver. Thus burdened, I regained our miserable garret in the Rue de la Harpe. Hortebize and Catenac were waiting for me with inexpressible impatience and anxiety. You must remember that day, my friends. You knew that we were absolutely without a sou. You had seen me go out in a state of desperation; and it was I who, so far, had sustained your courage. You saw that I was utterly distracted by the thought of losing the woman I loved better than life itself; and you asked each other if, in crossing the bridges, I should have courage enough to resist the temptation of suicide, if I should be able to restrain myself from plunging into the Seine, and thus ending my misery. On my return, as soon as my friends perceived me, they rushed to meet me, overjoyed to see me again, but I roughly repelled them. 'Keep back,' I said; 'leave me to myself! I am no longer worthy of your companionship; but, at all events, here is money!' and, so saying, I threw the bags on the floor; one of them burst open, and the silver rolled forth on every side. Marie started up on her pallet, raising her arms in astonishment. 'Money!' she cried. 'Money! We shall have food, then—and I shall live!'

"In those days, Monsieur de Croisenois, my friends were very different to what you see them now. They started back in horror. They were convinced I had committed a crime. 'No, not a crime,' I said bitterly; 'at least, none that the law can reach. This money may be the price of our honour, but no one will ever know it but ourselves!'. None of us slept that night, marquis; but when daylight surprised us round a table covered with bottles, we, whom the difficulties of life had vanquished, we had unanimously declared war against Society, we had sworn we would attain fortune by fair means or foul; our association was decided on, its main features already planned."

XVIII.

As Mascarot was desirous of leaving Paul and Croisenois under the strongest possible impression, he now rose from his seat and walked up and down the room. If his intention had been to startle his hearers, he had unquestionably succeeded. Paul was actually breathless, and Croisenois, although he tried to struggle, was quite at a loss for one of those jocular remarks which, in such circumstances, pass as evidence of strength of mind. He understood very well that there must be some connection between this narrative and his own business with Mascarot; but what this connection was, he was wholly at a loss to divine. As for Catenac and Hortebize, who thought they fully understood their dear Baptiste, they exchanged surprised and anxious glances, as if asking each other, "Has he been speaking in all good faith, or is this but the prologue of some comedy, the sense of which escapes

us?" With B. Mascarot, indeed, it was difficult, if not impossible, to divine exactly his object or intentions.

However, the agent seemed quite indifferent to the effect he had produced. Returning to his desk, he adjusted his spectacles in his usual style, and the others were able to see that his features, all aglow with hatred and anger a moment before, had now regained their habitually placid expression. "I hope, marquise," said he, "that you will excuse this long but indispensable preface, which you may think sensational enough for a novel. Now, let us turn to the practical question."

Knowing how much weight the attitude of a speaker imparts to his words, Mascarot again rose, and stationed himself erect with his back to the fire. His spectacles certainly concealed his eyes; but his whole person seemed charged like an electric battery with magnetic fluid, and he commanded absolute attention as he spoke.

"On the night I speak of," he resumed, "we—my friends and I—broke loose from all obligations of honour and morality, and shook off all the shackles of duty. As for the plan which leaped, as it were, complete from my brain, I can expose it in no better terms than those I used twenty years ago when explaining it to my friends. You know, marquise, that as summer advances, there is scarcely a cherry without its worm. The finest ones, the largest and reddest, the freshest in appearance, are precisely those which, when opened, show the worm within. Just so, in the highest circles of a city like Paris, there is not one family—I say not one, and use the term advisedly—that, however prosperous and wealthy it may seem, however fair to look upon, has not some guilty secret, some shameful mystery and wound concealed beneath the surface. Now, suppose a man gained possession of all of these secrets? Would he not be master of the world? Would he not be more powerful than the most powerful monarch? Would he not be able to manage everything according to his own fancies and interests? Very well, then, I said to myself that I would be that man."

Ever since the origin of the Marquis de Croisenois' connection with Mascarot, he had had shrewd suspicions of the nature of the agent's operations. "You are describing an elaborate system of blackmailing!" he exclaimed.

B. Mascarot bowed low with an ironical smile. "Precisely, marquise. It is precisely what is called blackmailing. Relatively speaking, the word may be a new one, but the thing itself is doubtless as old as the world itself. The first day that a man, discovering some infamous act committed by a fellow creature, threatened him with exposure unless he submitted to certain demands, was the day that blackmailing was invented. If all that is old ought to be respected, then blackmailing surely should not be repudiated. How did the divine Aretino, who so proudly called himself the scourge of princes, earn his living, if you please? Why, he levied blackmail on kings! And what kings? Why, Francis the first to begin with, and his great rival the Emperor Charles to boot. However, we live in democratic times, and content ourselves with levying blackmail on the people—or, I should say—on every one possessed of means."

The avowal was so cynically impudent that a flush came to Croisenois' cheeks. "Oh! monsieur!" he protested. "Oh! monsieur!"

"Pshaw!" answered Mascarot, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, "are you afraid of a word? Who hasn't done more or less of this same blackmailing? Look at yourself. Don't you remember that night this very winter, when you caught a young foreigner cheating at cards at

your club. You said nothing to him or any one else at the time ; but you found out that he was possessed of means, and you called on him the next day and borrowed ten thousand francs. When do you intend to return them ? ”

Croisenois fell back helplessly in his chair. “ Horrible ! ” he murmured. “ Prodigious ! ”

But Mascaret had already resumed speaking. “ I know,” said he, “ at least two thousand persons in Paris who have no other means of support than blackmail. I have studied them all—from the low-born convict who extorts money from his former companion in prison, up to the swell who drives a tandem, and who, because chance has acquainted him with the frailty of some unfortunate woman, compels her to give him her daughter in marriage. If ever, one day on the boulevards, you should see the Prince de Salorge encounter Jailezac—the man on change who has such a villainous reputation that I wouldn’t even bow to him—just keep your eyes open ; you will see the prince, who is one of the proudest men I know of, walk straight up to that miserable defaulter and shake hands with him most cordially. Now why does he do that ? Ah ! I haven’t been able to find out ; but I am convinced that in all this there is some secret which would be worth at least a hundred thousand francs. I know a commissioner in the Rue de Douai, who in five years amassed a comfortable little fortune. Guess how. When he was trusted with a letter to take it anywhere, he invariably opened and read it. If it contained a single compromising line he pounced down upon the writer. There is scarcely a business enterprise without its parasites—skilful fellows who have discovered something which will not bear the light, and who consequently are paid to keep silence. I know one honourable society, the directors of which having once broken their statutes, are compelled to pay a yearly pension to a scoundrel decked with foreign orders, because he holds the proofs of their culpability. All these matters, it is necessary to say, are negotiated with the utmost care and secrecy, for in regard to blackmailing the police are alert, and the French courts extremely severe.”

B. Mascaret apparently desired to thrill his hearers with every note in the gamut. At the words “ courts ” and “ police,” they fairly shivered from head to foot, and Hortebize and Catenac alarmed at the turn their partner’s narrative was taking, tried by sign and gesture to induce him to discontinue. But Mascaret paid no heed to them, nor even troubled himself concerning his protégé, Paul, although the latter looked fairly frightened out of his wits. To all appearance the agent was only interested in M. de Croisenois’ demcanour, for leaving the others on one side he repeatedly addressed him by his title as if speaking for him alone. “ Our beginnings, marquis,” he resumed, “ were by no means examples of finished skill. For a long time, too, we were sowing our crops and you come in just as we are about to reap our harvests. Fortunately, the professions chosen by Catenac and Hortebize were admirably adapted to further our operations ; the former had become an advocate and the latter a medical man. Catenac dealt with the wounds of the purse, Hortebize with those of the body. You can easily understand that in their respective professions they naturally became acquainted with many secrets. As for myself, the head of the association, it was, of course, impossible for me to remain a mere looker-on with folded arms. But then what could I do ? There were several alternatives, but I was undecided, and for several weeks I discussed the question with myself. Our funds were diminishing, however, a determination be-

came urgent, and I at last decided to rent these rooms and establish and employment agency. I rightly considered that such a modest occupation would attract little or no attention. In other respects also, my provisions were correct, as the result has proved, and as my friends will tell you."

Hortelize and Catenac nodded affirmatively.

"At our epoch," continued the agent, "and with our manners and customs, it is certain that servants exercise very great influence and possess considerable knowledge of everything that transpires in their masters' households. It would be too long to inquire into the why and wherefore, but it is clear that the rich man in his private mansion in the midst of his servants is as strictly watched as any condemned criminal. Nothing he does escapes the curiosity of his menials. His words, looks, and gestures, are noted, weighed, and analysed. He cannot hide a thought, much less an act, for a mere week. The very secret he confides to his wife in the depth of night, with closed doors and his lips close to her ears, is more or less discovered."

The Marquis de Croisenois who, in default of another alternative had now resigned himself, was pleased to smile. "I know that," he murmured.

"Quite so," replied B. Mascarot. "You must have considered all this, for you have never taken a servant from our office."

"Oh, I'm so lucky in that respect."

"I'm aware of it. You have unique servants, improbable ones, men who refuse gold when it's offered to them. But, do you think for a moment that I am kept in ignorance of your acts? By no means. At this moment and is it prudent? you have a valet whom you literally know nothing about."

"Oh! Morel was recommended to me by an intimate friend, Sir Richard Wakefield!"

"Indeed! But this does not prevent me from doubting him. However, more of this on another occasion. Now to return to the subject in hand. As I was telling you, I conceived the idea of utilizing the immense power which servants now-a-days possess. I determined to condense it, as it were, like vapour, and then to employ it as we might decide! And it is precisely this I have done. This insignificant office is really the centre of a stupendous spider's web, which has cost me twenty years of patient labour, but which involves entire Paris in its ramifications. "I may stay here before the fire, but eyes and ears are at work for me in all directions. The police spend millions in fees to their agents, while I, without loosening my purse strings, have an army of faithful labourers. Every day I receive at least fifty servants of both sexes. Count for yourselves how many that would make at the end of the year. And while the agents of the police are compelled to hover round the houses they wish to watch, mine are inside, with far greater facilities for studying the interests, passions and intrigues of their masters and mistresses. And this is not everything. Through the employes, book-keepers, and cashiers, for whom I find situations, I have a foothold in the commercial world, whilst the waiters whom I supply to the restaurants, keep me acquainted with whatever transpires in the most secluded of private rooms."

It was in a tone of intense personal satisfaction that B. Mascarot explained the working of his machinery. His very spectacles glittered with joy.

"But don't imagine for a moment," he resumed, "that all these people are in my secret—by no means! The greater part of them are totally unaware of what they are doing, and in this is my great strength. Each of

them brings me a thread, and I twist the cord which binds my slaves. They come here and talk. They are malicious and indiscreet, that is all; we listen, sift, and piece and patch together all the information they bring, so that each evening I have more than one useful entry to make in my note-books. The people who serve me in this unsuspecting manner, remind me of those strange Brazilian birds whose presence is an infallible announcement of a subterranean spring. Wherever one of them sings, the thirsty traveller may dig, and he will surely find the water he seeks. My birds in like manner reveal to me the existence of a secret. It is then my business to dig. I set my special agents to work, we search and find. And now, marquis, I think you will understand the nature and object of our association?"

"I may add," insisted Dr. Hortebize, "that it has some years brought us in more than two hundred and fifty thousand francs."

If Monsieur de Croisenois disliked long stories, he was by no means insensible to the eloquence of figures. He was too familiar with the life of Paris not to understand that by throwing his net every day into troubled waters, Mascaret was bound to catch many fish—that is, acquire large sums of money. And this conviction having entered his mind, it did not require much urging to induce him to look favourably on the project. So with a most winning expression, he now asked, "And what must I do to earn the protection of the society?"

B. Mascaret was too acute not to at once perceive the drift of this question. If his lengthy explanation had obtained only this result, he would have considered it justified; but there was more than this. Paul, chilled with dismay at first, had gradually recovered his equanimity as he realised the power of the men who had taken his future in hand. He lost sight of the infamy of the speculation in his admiration of Mascaret's ingenious combinations.

"Now, Monsieur le Marquis," resumed the agent, "so far we have smiled fairly. It may seem to you that we have been rash, but in reality we have been exceedingly cautious and prudent. We have managed our people properly—we have driven none of them to extremities. We have never worried an insolvent vassal, we have granted time to those who were momentarily hard up. I sell secrets by instalments, as Jew dealers sell furniture. And, besides, we have not always demanded money. Catenac has secured comfortable berths for several of his relatives. Hortebize has obtained numerous gratifying satisfactions, and I myself have not disdained the little perquisites of self-love. No man is perfect. However, lucrative as our profession may be, marquis, we are beginning to tire of it. We are growing old, my friends, and I—and we need repose. We have, therefore, made up our minds to retire; but we wish, first of all, to turn to account everything we have left on hand. I possess an enormous mass of documents of all kinds, but they are, generally speaking, of a most delicate nature; and in many instances it would be difficult to obtain the real value they represent. However, I count on your assistance."

At this declaration Croisenois turned pale. What! Was he expected to go about like some highway robber, armed with compromising letters, in lieu of pistols, to say to men whom possibly he knew, "Your purse, or your honour!" He had no objection to sharing the profits of an ignoble traffic, but he scarcely cared to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. "Never!" he exclaimed, hastily; "no—never. You must not count on me."

His indignation seemed so sincere, and his determination so firm and

decided, that Hortebize and Catenac exchanged anxious looks. But a glance at Mascaret reassured them.

The agent simply shrugged his shoulders and adjusted his spectacles. "No nonsense, if you please, sir," he said, sternly. "Wait before you show so much decision. I told you that my documents were of a special nature, and this is why. One of the greatest difficulties we have to contend with is, that we often stumble across married people who, although they are wealthy, have not the free disposal of their own fortunes. Husbands say, it is quite impossible to take ten thousand francs from my fortune without the knowledge of my wife. Women say, I can only procure money through my husband. And both are sincere. I have seen many of them grovelling at my feet when they know me to be the possessor of some blasting secret. They have said to me, 'Have mercy—I will do all you wish. You shall have even more than you ask if you will only find some pretext that will enable me to obtain the money.' Now I have sought for some suitable pretext of the kind, and have found it in an industrial society which you will start before the month is over."

"Upon my honour!" remonstrated the marquis, "I really don't see—"

"I beg your pardon, you see perfectly well. A husband who can't give us five thousand francs without destroying all his domestic peace, will give us ten thousand when he can say to his wife, 'It is an investment.' And many a wife who has not a penny herself will induce her husband to bring us the sum we demand. And now, what do you think of the idea?"

"I think it excellent; but in what respect am I indispensable?"

"In the sense that we need a suitable person at the head of this company."

"But yourself?"

"Are you jesting, marquis? Do you imagine that I, the head of a mere employment office, can have weight enough to start such a company as I suggest? I should be laughed to scorn. Hortebize, a physician, and, worse still, a homœopathist, would fare no better. Catenac, of course, is barred by his position and profession from all such speculations; still, he will be our legal adviser. Now, to begin with the smallest possible chance of success, the company must at least appear to be serious."

The marquis was embarrassed. "But I really see in myself," said he, "none of the qualities requisite for a financier or speculator."

"You are really very modest. In the first place, you have your title and your name; these, I am quite ready to admit, signify very little in our own eyes, but they would have a great effect upon the masses. Are there not companies which pay, and pay well, for the names and titles they print at the head of their prospectuses?"

"But my position is singularly unfortunate, from a financial point of view."

"It is, on the contrary, excellent. Before starting on this enterprise you can pay all your debts, and when that's done the world will conclude that you are possessed of a very large capital. The fortune left by your brother, so depreciated at present, will acquire enormous importance. Your marriage with Mademoiselle de Mussidan will set you on a pinnacle. What more do you want?"

"My reputation is detestable; I am called frivolous and extravagant!"

"So much the better. The day you issue the prospectus of your society there will be a general laugh. Men will say to each other, 'What do you think Croisenois is up to now? What on earth has put it into his head to go

into business?" However, you can afford to let folks laugh. You will have Mademoiselle Sabine's dowry of a million, besides your share in the profits of the enterprise."

What a prospect for a man to whom existence was a problem he was called upon to solve each morning!

"Suppose I agreed to accept this proposal," he asked, "how would the comedy end?"

"In the most simple way in the world. When all the stock is sold you will quietly lock the door and let things take care of themselves."

Croisenois started up. "That is to say," he exclaimed, "you mean to sacrifice me entirely. You wish to send me to the galleys!"

"How ungrateful he is," answered Mascarot blandly, "when I am doing my very best to keep him from going there."

"Sir!"

But Maitre Catenac now intervened. Not being able to keep clear of the net himself, it was his interest to aid Mascarot as much as possible.

"You do not understand, my dear sir," he said to Croisenois. "Haven't you ever heard of limited liability companies? Now, listen to me. To-morrow call upon a notary. Tell him you wish to make an appeal to intelligent capitalists for the development of some enterprise or another—say the sale of Pyrenean marble, if you like. However, you open your subscription list, which will be immediately filled up by Baptistin's clients. When these funds are in our hands, what then? We will take care to reimburse all strangers who buy our stock, and we will write to the others, those whose secrets we hold, that the thing has been a failure—that we are ruined, in short—that the capital is lost. Now, Baptistin will have obtained from each of his people a discharge in full, so that the thing will blow over quietly, and you will in no wise be troubled."

The marquis listened, and thought for a moment. "But, gentlemen," he exclaimed, "all those who subscribe under compulsion must necessarily know that I have behaved dishonourably."

"Of course—"

"They would despise me."

"Necessarily—but they would never dare to let you see it. And appearances are enough, are they not? Who would have thought you so difficult—and, between ourselves, who is really esteemed and respected now-a-days? No one. Consideration is only surface deep, and it is really not worth while to go deeper."

The clever marquis still hesitated. "And are you sure of your clients?" he asked at last. "Are you certain there are enough of them to make the operation worth the trouble, expense, and risk we should run?"

B. Mascarot was precisely waiting for this question in order to strike the last blow. "My calculations are all made," said he, "and they are exact." As he spoke he took from his desk a bundle of those slips of card which he spent his life in arranging. "I have here," he resumed, "the names of three hundred and fifty persons who will each turn ten thousand francs into the concern."

"Good heavens! Why, that would make three millions and a half."

"You are quick at figures, I see. However, you might like to know the nature of my weapons. Well, then, just listen; I will take the first ones that come." So saying he shuffled up the cards, and drawing one at hazard from the pack, began to read. "N—, civil engineer. Five letters addressed by him to the wife of the gentleman who secured him his present

lucrative post, and who can deprive him of it at a moment's notice. Good for fifteen thousand francs.

"P——, merchant. Positive proof that his last failure was fraudulent, and that he concealed two hundred thousand francs from his creditors. He will bleed to the extent of twenty thousand francs.

"Madame V——. Her photograph in too scanty a costume. Poor, but will pay three thousand francs.

"Madame H——. Three letters of her mother's, leaving no doubt that the latter was guilty of frailty before marriage. Letter from a midwife as corroborative testimony. Madame H—— manages her husband, and must be made to pay ten thousand francs.

"L——. A song, which is both impious and obscene, in his own hand writing and signed in full. Two thousand francs.

"S——. Head clerk in the —— Company. Draft of an agreement specifying the private commission to be paid to him on a certain contract. Also a cooked account of his. Can be made to pay fifteen thousand francs.

"X——. Part of his correspondence with L—— in 1848. Three thousand francs.

"Madame M. de M——. A true account of her adventures with Monsieur J. —."

This was more than sufficient to satisfy M. de Croisenois. "It's enough," he interrupted; "I surrender. Yes, I bow to your mysterious power, which is more formidable than that of the police."

"And far more serious too," added excellent Dr. Hortebize. "We have never examined our operations from that point of view. However, do nothing contrary to the law, to loyalty and faith, and blackmail won't be levied on you. So you see blackmailing, after all, is a means of moralisation."

The Marquis de Croisenois was too disturbed to appreciate the doctor's banter. He turned towards B. Mascaret and curtly exclaimed, "I await your orders, monsieur."

As usual, B. Mascaret won the day. He had successively conquered the Count de Mussidan, Paul Violaine, and Catenac, and now he had the marquis at his feet.

A dozen times during this discussion Croisenois had been tempted to refuse his co-operation, but each time the words had died away on his lips; for he had realised that he was in the power of this strange man with the cynical laugh and contemptuous air, who probably knew far more of his private life than the one dishonourable transaction he had named.

Now, the marquis had enough peccadilloes on his conscience to quiver under the look riveted on him through those blue spectacles—a look which he realized was as keen as that of a judge questioning a criminal. His vanity unquestionably suffered from the humiliating dependence in which he found himself, and the few drops of honest blood left in his veins curdled at the thought of his position. But, on the other hand, he was dazzled by this mysterious power, now for the first time revealed to him, and was stimulated to acquiescence by the thought that he would henceforth fight the battle of life associated with men of such unquestionable strength and nerve. At first he had fancied that he was to be sacrificed, but the evidence that their interests were one had reassured him. All these considerations had induced him to speak these words, which, an hour earlier, would have burned his haughty lips, "I await your orders!"

This humility was needless. Only the inexperienced allow the full weight

of their tyranny to be felt. B. Mascarot was not inexperienced, and he knew that, while a conquered man may forget his defeat, he never forgives a gratuitous insult. It was, therefore, with perfect courtesy that he replied, "I have no orders to give, sir. Our interests are equal, and we must deliberate together and act in concert before we can decide on the most suitable measures."

Croisenois bowed, grateful for this unexpected politeness succeeding so much brutality.

"It is useless for me," resumed B. Mascarot, "to show you the advantage of your resolution. You wrote to me the other day that you were at the end of your resources, and I know that you have nothing to expect in the future."

"Allow me, I have the property of my poor brother George, who disappeared so strangely."

B. Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "As you are now one of us, my dear marquis," said he, "let me assure you that frankness between us is altogether desirable."

"I don't see," answered the marquis, with an air of surprise, "how I am wanting in frankness."

"Why the deuce do you talk to us of this mythical fortune?"

"It is not mythical, sir; it exists, and is of considerable amount."

"We know that. It can be fixed at about twelve or fourteen hundred thousand francs."

"Well, then, can't I obtain it? Articles 127 and 129 of the Code Napoleon—"

He stopped short, for he noticed an expression of ill-restrained amusement on Dr. Hortebize's face.

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Mascarot. "When it was merely a question of filing a declaration of absence and obtaining provisional leave to receive the income, you did everything you could; but your situation has changed, and latterly you have secretly done your utmost to prevent the capital from being handed over to you."

"What! Do you suppose—"

"Tut, tut! You did well. You have anticipated and discounted and rediscounted that fortune to such an extent that it would never suffice to pay your creditors. If it were placed in your hands to-morrow, your credit would be gone in four-and-twenty hours; but as long as it remains where it is you can use it as a bait to allure your tradespeople."

Croisenois was a true gamester. Finding that Mascarot was well acquainted with his little dodge, he laughed the matter off, impudently exclaiming, "A fellow does what he can, you know."

Mascarot had now resumed himself in his easy chair. His animation had left him, and he seemed overcome with fatigue. "It would be cruelty, marquis," he said in a weary voice, "to detain you longer. We will see each other again shortly, and arrange our plans in detail. In the meantime Catenac will draw up the scheme of the company and drill you in the financial ways and language you will need to be acquainted with."

Was this a dismissal? M. de Croisenois and the lawyer evidently took it as such, for they at once rose, and after shaking hands with Mascarot and the doctor, and bowing to Paul, they departed together, like two old friends, rather than acquaintances of a couple of hours' standing.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Mascarot revived. "Well Paul," he asked, "what do you think of all you have heard?"

With soft and pliable natures impressions may be both keen and deep, but not lasting. After being almost overwhelmed by emotion, Paul, although still a little pale, had now recovered his sangfroid. He had almost succeeded in stifling the qualms of conscience, and advised by vanity, thought of adopting a cynical tone worthy of his honourable patrons. "I think," he answered, in a fairly steady voice, "that you need me. So much the better. I am not a marquis, but I will obey you without beating about the bush like M. de Croisenois."

Paul's words in no way surprised Mascarat; but did they please him? It was difficult to tell. A skilful observer would have detected on his face, generally so impassive, indications of a contest between two absolutely opposite sentiments--lively satisfaction and intense annoyance. As for Dr. Hortebize, he was simply wonder-struck at the cool audacity of this neophyte, who was in some measure his pupil. The exact meaning of the scene which had taken place now flashed into his mind, and he struck his forehead with the astonishment of a man who wonders that so simple a matter could have hitherto escaped his comprehension. "What a fool I am!" he thought to himself. "Baptistin was not really addressing himself to the Marquis de Croisenois, but to Paul. What a wonderful actor he is! With what astonishing dexterity did he measure each word, so that it might silence remorse or awaken cupidity in this vain young fellow's facile nature."

In the meanwhile Paul was disturbed by his protector's silence. If at first he had been horrified at finding himself in the hands of this extraordinary man, he now trembled at the idea of being abandoned by him and left to his own resources. "I am waiting, sir," he said at last.

"And for what, pray?"

"For you to tell me on what conditions I may make a name for myself, win a fortune, and marry Mademoiselle Flavia Rigal, whom I love."

Mascarat smiled, and a villainous smile it was, too. "You mean whose dowry you covet, I presume," said he. "Let us state things clearly."

"Excuse me, sir, I said precisely what I meant."

The doctor, who had not the same reasons for being serious as his honourable friend indulged in a cynical smile. "And Rose?" he asked, "that pretty Rose?"

"Rose is a thing of the past," answered the young fellow. "I now realise my simplicity, and, so far as I am concerned, she no longer exists." Paul unquestionably spoke the truth, even when he added, "And I am half inclined to regret Mademoiselle Rigal's fortune, which seems to create so great an obstacle between us."

This declaration dispelled the clouds which darkened Mascarat's brow, and his spectacles emitted a softer light. "Reassure yourself," he answered gaily, "we will conquer that obstacle, eh, Hortebize? Only, Paul, my boy, I must not conceal from you that the part I wish you to play is infinitely more difficult than the one assigned to M. de Croisenois. It is also more dangerous by far, but at all events the reward will be in correspondence with the risk."

"Sustained and advised by you, I feel capable of doing everything and of succeeding!"

"You will need great audacity, unparalleled self-possession and exceeding skill. To begin with, you must renounce your very personality."

"Which I do with all my heart."

"And you must become altogether another person. You must adopt his

name, his past, his habits and ideas, his virtues and his vices. You must forget all that you have ever done or said yourself, and must labour to convince yourself that you are really the person you represent. This is the only way in which you can deceive others into a similar belief. The task will be a mighty one."

"Ah! sir," cried Paul, with enthusiasm, "do we trouble ourselves much about the obstacles in our road when we walk with our eyes riveted upon the showy light at the end?"

The genial doctor positively clapped his hands, as if he were applauding some actor on the stage. "Well said!" he exclaimed.

"Then," continued Mascaret, "we have but to raise the last corner of the veil and reveal to you your lofty destiny. This shall be speedily done—in a few days from now. In the meanwhile summon all your courage—drill your features, your eyes and lips so that they may never betray your secret thoughts. Do you understand me, my lord duke?"

The worthy agent stopped short, for after three or four discreet taps at the door Beaumarchef now presented himself. He was gorgeous to behold, for taking advantage of half an hour, when there was scarcely anyone in the office, he had gone to array himself in his best clothes.

"What's up?" asked Mascaret.

"Two letters, sir."

"Thanks. Give them to me, and leave us."

As the "assistant partner," accustomed to these brusque congés, retired, Mascaret examined the letters. "Ah!" he said; "news from Van Klopen and the Mussidan's. Let us first of all see what the illustrious ladies' tailor has to say." He tossed aside the envelope, and read aloud as follows:—"Dear Sir—Be satisfied; our friend Verminet has executed your orders with extreme cleverness. At his instigation Gaston de Gandelu has imitated, on five separate notes of a thousand francs each, Monsieur Martin Rigal's signature—the banker whose daughter you sent to me.

"I have these five notes at your disposal, and I remain, while awaiting new orders in respect to Madame de Bois d'Ardon,

"Your obedient servant,—VAN KLOPEN."

"That's one of them settled!" exclaimed B. Mascaret. "He won't ever cross our friend Paul's road with impunity." Then opening the other letter, he likewise read it aloud:—"I have to announce to you, sir, the rupture of the marriage between Mademoiselle Sabine and Monsieur de Breulh-Favrelay. Mademoiselle is very ill. I have just heard the physician say she would probably not live through the day.—FLORESTAN."

At this intelligence, which threatened to frustrate all his plans, B. Mascaret was filled with such sudden fury that he brought his hand down with a crash upon his desk. "Thunder and lightning!" he shouted: "Is it possible that this little fool will play us such a shabby trick as to die now? We should be nicely situated with Croisenois on our hands. We should have all our work to do over again."

He pushed back his chair, and walked hurriedly up and down the room. "Florestan may be mistaken," he exclaimed. "Why should Mademoiselle de Mussidan's illness coincide with the rupture of this marriage? There is some secret, which we must know, for we cannot work in the dark."

"Do you wish me to go to the Mussidan's?" asked the doctor.

"Yes; it would be a good idea. Your carriage is at the door, is it not? You are a doctor, and they will let you see Mademoiselle Sabine."

Hortebize had already donned his overcoat, and was turning to leave

when Mascarot stopped him. "No," said he, "I have changed my mind. Neither of us ought to be seen near the house. I fancy, doctor, that one of our mines has exploded; it was too heavily charged. I fancy there has been an explanation between the count and the countess, and between the two the daughter has been struck down."

"But how shall we know?"

"I will see Florestan, and by him, I may discover the truth."

Thereupon, without another word, he dashed into his room and changed his clothes with all possible dispatch, at the same time leaving the door open, so as to be able to continue his conversation with the doctor.

"This blow," said he, "would be nothing if I had not so much on hand just now, but besides Croisenois I have to attend Paul. The Champloce matter must be hurried on; and Catonac, the traitor, has put Perpignan and the duke in communication. I must see Perpignan and find out exactly what has been told him, and what he has guessed. I must also see Caroline Schimmel, and extract some information from her. Ah! why can't we turn twenty-four hours into thirty-six."

He was now ready, and called the doctor to him. "I am off," he said, in a low voice. "Don't lose sight of Paul for one single moment. We are not yet sure enough of him to let him loose with our secret. Take him to dine at Martin Rigal's, and then make some excuse for insisting upon his staying at your rooms to-night. See me to-morrow."

Thereupon he went out, too pre-occupied to hear the doctor's parting words: "Good luck, good luck!"

XIX.

On leaving the Mussidan mansion after his promise to Sabine, M. de Breulh-Faverlay did not enter his carriage which was waiting for him in the courtyard. "Go home," said he, to his coachman, "I will follow on foot."

As often happens after a crisis, he had an imperious longing for motion. He wished to be alone, to tire himself out if possible, in hopes that he might thus collect his ideas, and recover his self-possession. He was not merely affected, but also surprised, and for long years had never experienced anything approaching his present feelings. His friends would have been amazed had they seen him striding along the Champs Elysées. He had quite lost that superb frigidity of manner "So-English-like" which all the young members of his club admired; his features usually so impassive bore signs of deep emotion, and mingled passion and stupefaction so carried him away that as he walked along, he actually talked aloud and gesticulated.

"And this is life!" he said. "A man fancies he has turned to steel—he calls himself blasé, aged, hardened—and lo! one look from two beautiful eyes makes him a school-boy again; he blushes and stammers and even—confound it all! detects a little moisture in the corner of his eye!"

He already loved Sabine when he asked her hand of her father—but not as he loved her, now that he knew she could not be his wife. At this moment she appeared to him to be endowed with every charming gift. Who would ever have supposed that he, the petted idol of society, adored by all the women who knew him, and feared by all the men as a rival, could be refused by the girl to whom he offered his fortune and his name?

"Ah!" he said to himself, regretfully, "she is just the companion I

dreamed of. Where else could I find such a tender nature, such an intelligent mind, so much innocence and frank fearlessness? Among the foolish dolls around me, who dress, and chatter, and talk slang, and imitate the women of the *demi-monde*? Is there another Sabine among the senseless creatures who look on life as a perpetual *cotillon*, and who take a husband as they choose a partner, because—a girl cannot waltz alone?" He hated all other women at this precise moment. "What a noble expression her face bore," he thought, "as she spoke of him. She believes in him entirely, and she adopts all his thoughts. With what beautiful pride she said: 'We—we are poor! We have no name!'"

However, M. de Breulh tried to battle against his jealous feelings. "Bah!" said he, twirling his walking stick. "The long and short of it is, I shall certainly die a bachelor. My valet will be my best friend in my old age. I shall make a god of my stomach. Baron Brisso declares that a man can comfortably eat four meals a day. That is something to look forward to; and to quicken my digestion, I shall have my heirs, those cousins of mine, quarrelling round my chair."

He shivered, but added presently, with a deep sigh: "Ah, my life's a failure!"

Meanwhile, cruel as was his deception and his wound, M. de Breulh saw nothing extraordinary in the fact that a woman should prefer another man to himself. He regretted it, but that was all. Sabine had judged him correctly when she said to herself, that he was worthy of any woman's love. M. de Breulh was indeed deserving of a very different pedestal to the one on which his friends and enemies, equally idiotic, had placed him. He was superior to his life, to his associates, and to the time in which he lived. On the death of his uncle he had thrown himself into what is called the whirlpool of fashionable dissipation, but he had soon wearied of an empty restless life. This fastidious mortal was not satisfied with possessing a victorious racing stable, with seeing his "cracks" made hot favourites by all the sporting journals, with being deceived by some actress whom he allowed a few hundred louis a month. For some time already, he had been seeking for some positive aim in life, some task to which he could devote all his energy and intelligence. He had determined that on the eve of his marriage he would sell his race horses and altogether break away from his old life, and now this long wished for marriage would never take place!

When he entered his club the traces of his emotion were so evident, that several young men around the card tables exchanged looks of dismay and hastened to ask if by chance, his horse "Chamboran," already a hot favourite for the Grand Prix, were not laid up.

"No," he answered, as he hurried into one of the small saloons set apart for letter-writing. "No, Chamboran is all right."

"What ill luck has befallen De Breulh?" asked one of the club men.

"Heaven only knows! but he evidently is in great haste to send off a letter."

He was in fact writing a note to M. de Mussidan and as it was to retract his word and request of Sabine's hand, the task was by no means an easy one. And, on reading his letter over, De Breulh noticed that it had an ironical turn, and that its general tenour indicated such mortification on his part, that inquiries as to what he really meant must necessarily follow. However chivalrous a man may be, he is still human, and some germs of evil ferment under the most generous resolutions.

"No," said the baron, "this letter is unworthy of me."

And upon this reflection, he began a second note, weighing every word, seeking for the best reasons he could bring forward, speaking vaguely of his life, of the difficulty of breaking up old habits, and of a liaison he could not terminate as he had intended. This little *chef d'œuvre* of diplomacy brought to a conclusion, he handed it to a servant, with directions to carry it instantly to its address.

M. de Broulh had thought that as soon as this duty was fulfilled, he should feel free in mind and body. But he was mistaken. He took a seat at a card-table, but at the end of a quarter of an hour, he felt that he decidedly had enough of gambling. He ordered dinner, but he had no appetite, and could not eat. He went to the opera, yawned, and the music made him feel nervous. At last he went home. The day had seemed a year long. He could not sleep, for he was still worried with thoughts of Sabine, whose fair face was ever before his eyes. What kind of man, thought he, was the one she preferred to him?

He esteemed Mademoiselle de Mussidan too much not to feel certain that her choice was worthy of her. At the same time, he had too much experience of life not to know that there are many seemingly inexplicable passions! When so many experienced men of the world are so often deluded and deceived, was it not quite possible for a young girl to make a mistake.

"What can I do for her?" said M. de Broulh to himself. "Can I open her eyes in any way?" And then, to excuse himself probably, for indulging in the faintest shadow of hope after what had taken place, he added: "If he be worthy of her, so be it, I will help her to overcome the obstacles in her path!"

The idea pleased him, and he took a bitter pleasure in thinking that he might perhaps insure the happiness of the woman he loved, and who, notwithstanding, had rejected him. Perhaps, without his knowing it, there was mingled with this generosity a vague desire to display his generosity to Sabine and awaken her admiration, if not her love.

At four o'clock in the morning he was still sitting in an arm-chair in front of the dying embers of his fire. He had almost decided to go and see André. When a man is rich it is easy for him to find an excuse to visit a painter's studio. M. de Broulh had no ideas to what he might do and say when he got there, he left it entirely to chance, trusting, perhaps, that his experience would properly advise him at the last moment. He had made up his mind before going to sleep, but on waking up, he again hesitated. Why should he meddle in a matter which did not concern him? He asked himself this question again and again. However, he was spurred on by curiosity, and so, at about two o'clock in the afternoon he ordered his carriage and in a few minutes afterwards was driving rapidly towards the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne.

Madame Poileveu, André's discreet concierge, was leaning on her broom at the street door when M. de Broulh's magnificent equipage drew up before her.

The good woman was quite dazed. Never in all her life had she beheld such showy steeds, nor seen so much silver on harness. The carriage was brilliant with varnish, and the liveried coachman and footman gorgeous to behold.

"Good heavens!" she thought, "he can't be coming here for us. He has certainly mistaken the house."

But her amazement was still greater when M. de Broulh emerged from

his brougham and asked, "Does Monsieur André, the artist, live here?"

"To be sure he does, and has been here for two years. Ah! if all artists were only like him! Never once has he been behind-hand with his rent. And then he is so orderly and sensible, so polite and considerate. There is never any rioting in his rooms. In my opinion he is absolutely perfect. If it were not for the little lady of the Champs Elysées—But there, now, my tongue is running away with me."

She rambled on, scarcely knowing what she was saying, so inquisitively did she watch the owner of this magnificent equipage.

"Where is his studio?" interrupted M. de Breulh, becoming impatient.

"On the fourth story—to the right—name on the door—can't make a mistake," jerked out the concierge. "But I'll show you the way, sir."

"By no means, my good woman, I won't trouble you." And M. de Breulh went towards the stairs, leaving Madame Poileven as motionless as Lot's wife after her crystallisation.

"Lawk-a-daisies!" she muttered, "coming to see Monsieur André with all this parade! I don't understand it, for Monsieur André never puts on any airs. Why, for four days Poileven hasn't swept his rooms, and yet he has never complained. But of course things can't go on like that. An artist who has friends like those coming to see him must be taken better care of. I must really find out who this great lord may be!" So saying she hid her broom behind the door and turned her attention to the footman.

In the meantime M. de Breulh had climbed the stairs with great deliberation. He evidently did not wish to arrive at the top entirely out of breath. (On reaching the topmost landing he was about to knock at the door on which he read André's name, when hearing a quick, lithe bound on the stairs behind him, he turned, and found himself face to face with a tall, dark, young fellow, clad in one of those long white blouses which ornamental sculptors usually wear, and carrying a huge zinc pitcher which he had evidently just filled at the pump in the courtyard.

"Monsieur André?" asked M. de Breulh.

"Yes, sir, I am he."

"I wish to speak to you."

"Be kind enough to walk in here." And the young painter opened the door of his studio and showed his visitor in.

M. de Breulh's first impression of André had been extremely favourable. He had been struck by his frank countenance, clear honest eyes, and full rich voice. But while he said, "He is a manly, good-looking fellow," he was shocked by the costume André wore, and this although he had thrown aside many prejudices. It was difficult for him to believe that a man beloved by Sabine de Mussidan could wear a blouse and go to the pump for water. However, he did not allow his surprise to be seen. In fact, since the previous evening, he had had time to regain his usual air of indifference.

"I ought to apologize sir, for receiving you like this," said André. "But the truth is, when a man is not wealthy he is never well served except by himself!"

As he spoke he threw off his blouse without the least embarrassment, and placed his pitcher in a corner. His air and manner pleased M. de Breulh, who smiled cordially.

"It is for me to apologize for my intrusion," said he. "I was sent her by one of my friends—" He hesitated for a name.

"Ah, yes. By Prince Crescenzi, perhaps!"

M. de Broulh hardly knew the celebrated amateur, but he snatched at the perch which was offered him. "Precisely!" he answered. "The prince extols your talent and speaks of you with the greatest enthusiasm. Having the utmost confidence in his taste, I said to myself that I should very much like to have a picture by you; and I can assure you your work will be in good company!"

André bowed, colouring as deeply as a school-girl complimented by a bishop. "I am infinitely obliged to you for your patronage, sir," he said, "but unfortunately, I fear you have taken useless trouble in calling on me—"

"And why?"

"Because I have been so busy in other ways during the last few months that I have really nothing to show you."

"Never mind," interrupted M. de Broulh, "we have the future before us. What is not done you can do."

"That is very true, sir, if you are disposed to place confidence in me—"

"Of course I am," interrupted De Broulh.

"In that case, we have only to choose a subject."

André had by this time quite conquered his visitor, who said to himself, "I ought, of course, to hate this fellow, but upon my life, I think I like him better than any one I ever saw!"

As he remained silent, mentally analysing his feelings, the young painter spoke again: "I have here," said he, "some thirty sketches in oils which might, I hope, make decent paintings, and if one of the subjects happened to suit you—"

"Let us examine them," said De Broulh, courteously.

Having made his estimate of the young man's character, he now wished to judge of him as an artist, and proceeded to examine the sketches and cartoons on the walls with serious attention.

André did not speak, but thought to himself that this order might prove the turning point in his fortunes, for Prince Crescenzi was one of the seven or eight European amateurs whose fiat sufficed for the merest daub to be valued at ten thousand francs. However, André was in no mood to rejoice, for he was more sad and hopeless that morning than ever before in his harassed life. Two evenings previously, Sabine had left him, saying that she was about to take a decisive step and would write to him on the morrow. The morrow had gone by, and now it was four o'clock on the second day, and yet not one word had he received from her. He was on thorns—not that he doubted Sabine, but because he had no means of ascertaining what might have transpired at the Mussidan mansion, which he was quite unable to enter. He was at this moment undergoing intolerable torture at the thought that his destiny was no doubt being decided, without his being able to influence it in the slightest degree, or even to hasten its consummation.

Meanwhile M. de Broulh had finished his examination. He considered that André's talent was indisputable, although there was evidence of inexperience, together with some great faults in the designs offered to view. Still they were all full of originality, and plainly enough André was a true artist in the broadest sense of the phrase. De Broulh's jealousy almost revived as he felt himself obliged to make this admission. But after a brief struggle he crushed all unworthy sentiments for good, and frankly and loyally offered the young painter his hand.

"When I came here," he said, "I was desirous of having a painting by you, and now I am altogether determined to have one. I am no longer influenced by a friend's opinion, I can see and appreciate your talent myself."

And as André did not speak he resumed : " I have chosen my subject, now we will discuss it in detail."

Poor, without patrons, and artistically speaking unschooled, hampered moreover by the rude labour his poverty necessitated, André had had neither time nor means to study in southern lands the secrets of classical art. He contented himself with portraying what he saw and felt. Among his sketches there was one which he called, "*Monday at the barrière.*" On Mondays the intemperate Parisian workman habitually takes an outing, and his outing frequently ends in strife. Thus in André's sketch, in the foreground, two men were fighting and a third endeavouring to separate them. They were in their shirts, which torn apart, allowed their broad chests to be seen. The muscles of their brawny arms stood out in bold relief. Their features were convulsed with hatred, wine, and anger. A little to the right lay a woman with loosened hair, unconscious and bleeding from a wound on the temple, while two of her terrified companions leaning over her were trying to bring her back to life. A few lookers on—children running away in fright, and in the distance policemen hurrying to the rescue—made up the picture. The subject was commonplace, but true—and it is truth alone in these days that can save art. Such was the sketch that M. de Breulh selected.

André next entered into full particulars concerning the composition, the proportions of the figures and the dimensions of the canvas. In short, nothing was forgotten. His visitor, with voice and gesture, approved all he said.

"Whatever you do," he remarked, "will be well done, of that I am certain. Let nothing hamper you : follow your inspirations."

M. de Breulh was in an agony to get away. He keenly realised how false his position was. André's confidence troubled him exceedingly and he almost lost his self-assurance. When everything else was arranged it cost him a violent effort to broach the question of remuneration. If he looked for any false modesty and affected disinterestedness he was disappointed, for he met with none.

"Monseieur," said André, "the value of a picture is a conventional matter. A canvas of the dimensions we have agreed on costs eighty francs ; covered with paint, it may be worthless or priceless. Wait until it is finished to decide."

"Do you think," interrupted M. de Breulh, "that ten thousand francs—"

André waved his hand in protest. "Too much!" he exclaimed, "far too much! No, sir. As yet I have no reputation, and four thousand francs would be handsome remuneration. However, if I succeeded beyond all hope and expectation, I might ask you six thousand."

"Very well," said M. de Breulh, drawing from his pocket an elegant Russian leather case, and laying on the table two notes of a thousand francs each, he added, "I will pay you as usual, half in advance."

The young painter turned scarlet. "You are jesting, sir," he stammered.

"Not at all," answered De Breulh, gravely. "I have certain fixed principles in business matters which I never depart from." And then, in the most encouraging tone, he added : "These notes are given instead of a written contract, that is all."

In spite of this assurance, André's pride was hurt. "But, I can't give you this picture for five or even six months," said he. "I have a contract with a rich architect, M. Gandelu, to execute the ornamental sculpture on his house."

"Never mind," said M. de Breulh, "take your own time."

Of course it was not possible for André to offer any further opposition, unless he wished to look like a fool. He therefore quietly assented, and even thought to himself, that the money came at a time when it was much needed.

"Now," said De Breulh approaching the door and opening it, prior to departure, "let me wish you success. In the meantime, if you will come some morning and breakfast with me, I will show you a Murillo which will gladden your heart!" And as if to confirm the invitation, he handed the artist his card and left the studio.

A moment elapsed before André looked at the card, but when his eyes fell upon it, the name of De Breulh-Faverlay started out like a flash of lightning across a thunderous sky. For a moment he could not breathe, and then he was shaken from head to foot with intense anger. He fancied he had been cajoled, bribed—trifled with! Hardly knowing what he was doing, he dashed out on to the landing, and leaning over the baluster called out, "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

De Breulh, who was now on the lower floor, looked up.

"Come back!" cried André, "come back!"

After a moment's hesitation the baron obeyed, and as soon as he reached the studio, André abruptly exclaimed, in a voice quivering with indignation, "Take back your money, sir; I will not have it!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Simply that I have reflected. I cannot paint a picture for you."

"Ah! indeed—and why, pray?"

"Why?" M. de Breulh knew perfectly well why. He instantly realised that Sabine had spoken about him to his lover—a point he had not thought of before. With a certain lack of generosity, he took advantage of the young artist's difficult position.

"Because," stammered André.

"Because is no reason," said De Breulh, mercilessly.

André was fast losing his head. It was impossible for him to give the reason of this sudden change of manner. He would have died rather than pronounce Sabine's name, and considered there was but one way out of his difficulty—"Well," he answered, with a cold stare of disdain, "your face displeases me! Is that a reason?"

"Do you mean to insult me, Monsieur André?"

"Just as you please!"

Patience was by no means M. de Breulh's distinguishing quality. He turned white with anger and started forward, but his natural generosity came to the rescue, and recovering himself as far as possible, he exclaimed: "Accept my apologies, Monsieur André. I have played a part—I fear unworthy of you and of me. I ought, when I first came in, to have given you my name, and told you, 'I know everything.'"

"I do not understand you, sir," answered André in icy tones.

"If you don't understand me, why do you doubt me then? I have deserved your distrust, however. Cease to feign; Mademoiselle Sabine has spoken to me with the most entire frankness. And if you doubt my words and require a proof of my assertion, let me tell you that the canvas there, with its face to the wall, is the portrait of Mademoiselle de Musidan."

As André still did not speak, M. de Breulh smiled sadly. "I will say, furthermore," he resumed, "that yesterday, at Mademoiselle Sabine's desire, I withdrew my request for her hand."

André had been profoundly touched by M. de Breulh's hearty self-condemnation, and these last words finished his subjugation. "I can never thank you, sir—" he began.

But De Breulh interrupted him. "A man needs no thanks," said he, "for doing his duty. I should not tell you the truth, were I to deny that I was most painfully surprised. But tell me, would you not have done the same thing had you been in my place?"

"I think I should."

"And now we are friends, are we not?" and De Breulh held out his hand.

André grasped it, and stammered in reply, "Friends, yes, friends."

"Let us say no more about the picture, which was in reality a pretext," resumed De Breulh. "I will be perfectly frank with you. I said to myself, on my way here, 'If the man whom Mademoiselle Sabine prefers to me is worthy of her, I will do all in my power to induce her family to look favourably on his suit.' I came here to sit in judgment upon you, and I now say to you: Do me a great pleasure, and a great honour: allow me to place at your disposal, myself and my fortune, my influence, and that of my friends."

It was with devoted enthusiasm and absolute sincerity that M. de Breulh-Faverlay put himself at the disposal of this young fellow whose happiness he so envied. However, André shook his head. "I shall never forget your offer, sir; but—" He hesitated, and then suddenly resumed: "I will be as frank as yourself, and tell you the whole truth. You think me foolishly susceptible, no doubt; but you must remember that misfortunes, unless they destroy all personal dignity, excite and irritate a man's pride. I love Mademoiselle de Mussidan with all my heart. There is not one drop of blood in my veins that is not devoted to her service, and yet—" He checked himself, and then with more composure added, "Pray do not take offence at what I am about to say. I would renounce Mademoiselle Sabine for ever rather than accept your assistance."

"But that's absolute folly."

"No, no; it is not folly; it is wisdom. Were I to accede to your wishes, I should feel myself profoundly humiliated by your self-abnegation; I should be madly jealous of the rôle you played. Am I not already sufficiently conscious of your superiority? You are one of the wealthiest men in Paris; you belong to one of the most distinguished families in France; while I am poor; I am so utterly alone and unknown, sir, that I have never even been summoned for the conscription. In short, you possess everything I lack."

"But I also have been poor," replied De Breulh; "I have been more wretched, possibly, than ever you have been."

André, who knew nothing of M. de Breulh's past career, and was acquainted only with his present dazzling position, looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you know what I was doing at your age?" continued the baron. "I was dying of hunger at Sonora, and to keep myself from starvation I had to enter the service of a cattle-raiser. Do you think I learned nothing in those days?"

"Then," exclaimed the young artist, "you will be the better able to understand me. I am willing to admit myself to be your equal; but the day I accepted pecuniary assistance from you that equality would cease. I am indebted to my energy and courage for Mademoiselle de Mussidan's goodwill. She had faith in me from the day she said, 'Raise yourself to

my level.' She ordered me to do so, and I will obey her or perish in the attempt. But, at all events, I am determined to succeed or perish alone. I don't choose that any other man should be able to say or think: André owes all his happiness to my rare generosity and chivalrous unselfishness."

"Oh! monsieur!" protested De Breuhl; "monsieur!"

"No," interrupted André, "you must not misunderstand me! I know very well that such words would never pass your lips; but you could not help thinking them. I should know it, and the daughter of the Count de Mussidan, then the wife of the painter André, would know it too. That is to say, I should become Sabine's husband at the cost of the only things that belong to me—my pride and independence. Our very marriage would be her first disillusion; for she would involuntarily institute a comparison between us. What should I then be in her eyes? No, no, my life would be poisoned—your ghost would rise between my wife and myself!"

He stopped short, aghast at his own violence. Another sentence and he would perhaps have threatened this gallant man who showed such generous kindness to him. With a great effort he regained his self-control, and then, in a tone of perfect courtesy, added, "But I am talking at random, sir, for we owe you much already, and I hope you will allow me to consider myself your friend."

Like Sabine, he said, "we;" and just as Sabine had predicted, he counted all offers of patronage and protection. But M. de Breuhl was man enough to understand André's conduct—conduct which might possibly bring a smile to the lips of most people in these days, when all serious and exalted sentiments are considered preposterous and affected. The baron quietly replaced the bank-notes in his pocket-book, and then, in a ringing voice, exclaimed, "I approve of your conduct, sir; and remember that, at all times and at all seasons, you may rely upon Breuhl-Faverlay. Farewell!"

When he was again alone, André realised that he was less unhappy than he had been for two days. Thanks to M. de Breuhl, he knew now that Sabine had encountered no unexpected opposition in breaking off the projected marriage, and although astonished at her delay in writing to give him the glad tidings, he was no longer alarmed. It was impossible, however, for him to work, and so he threw himself into an arm-chair and ruminated over the scene that had just taken place. He would have totally forgotten the dinner-hour, if Madame Poileveu had not entered the studio, without knocking. "Here is a letter," she said; "the postman has just left it."

It was an unheard-of event for Madame Poileveu to carry a letter to the fourth floor; but the artist had assumed extraordinary importance in her eyes since she had seen his recent visitor's carriage. However, André was so preoccupied that this worthy woman's surprising complaisance did not strike him. He had no thoughts but for Sabine.

"A letter!" he exclaimed, starting up; and tearing it open he at once glanced at the signature. The note came from Modeste, Mademoiselle de Mussidan's maid. What did this mean? He shuddered, with a presentiment of some great misfortune, and, half bewildered, read as follows:—"I address you, sir, to inform you that mademoiselle succeeded in the matter she undertook; but I am sorry to say that I have also bad news for you. Mademoiselle is very ill."

These last words terrified André. "Sabine ill!" he stammered, without paying heed to Madame Poileveu's eager ears. "Sabine too ill to write to me herself! She may be in danger! She may even be dead!"

He repeated the last word wildly: "Dead! dead!" Then, crumpling up the disastrous letter and throwing it on to the floor, he rushed from the room and dashed down the stairs into the street. He had not even doffed his white blouse, nor paused to take a hat.

Mother Poileveu was astounded. "Good heavens!" said she; "what are we coming to? He's mad, to be sure." She paused and smiled, having just perceived the crumpled letter on the floor. With bland composure she at once picked it up, smoothed it out carefully, and read it. "And so," she murmured, "the little lady's name is Sabine. A pretty name, to be sure! And she is ill, is she? I have a notion that the old gentleman, so amiable and so badly dressed, who came here early this morning and questioned me about Monsieur André, would give something worth having for this letter. But no—that would never do! 'Honesty's the best policy,' as the papers say."

XX.

WHEN Madame Poileveu came to the conclusion that her artist was mad, she was not, perhaps, so very far from the truth. Her opinion was probably shared by all the people who met this tall young man in the white blouse, as he rushed with almost inconceivable rapidity along the streets leading from the Quartier des Martyrs to the Champs Elysées.

As he left his house he saw an empty cab, but he did not think of taking it; for could the miserable horse move as swiftly as his strong young limbs? He threaded his way through the crowd so hastily, and had so strange an expression, that people quickly moved aside to let him pass, and then turned to look after him. He had no idea what to do when he reached the Hôtel de Mussidan. Sabine was ill, dying possibly—well, if he could not see her, at least he would be near her. In Paris, such people are to be seen at every hour in the day: people who hurry along without seeing or hearing—driven onward by their passions as bullets are impelled by powder.

It was only on reaching the Rue de Matignon that André sufficiently recovered his senses to reflect and deliberate. As much to regain full possession of his faculties as his breath, he sat down at a few steps from the Hôtel de Mussidan. He had reached the spot!—and now, how should he go to work to obtain the information he wanted? It was dark. The gas lamps were barely visible through one of those February fogs which always follow sharp frosts. It was cold. The Rue de Matignon, always unfrequented, was now absolutely deserted. Not a single cab rolled by, and not a single footstep was heard; the only sound was that of the traffic in the busy Faubourg Saint Honoré some few hundred yards off. The young painter now realised with absolute despair that he was utterly powerless. He could not move hand or foot without compromising the woman he loved.

Still he rose and went towards the gate of the house, as if he hoped that its aspect would tell him something. It seemed to him that if Sabine were really dying the very stones would break out into lamentations. But the house was wrapped in fog, and he could hardly tell which of the windows were lighted. Reason bade him withdraw, wait patiently and hope; but the more imperious voice of passion said, "Wait!" And he waited. Why? He did not know. It seemed to him that Modeste, who had written, would divine that he was there, suffering an agony of suspense,

and that she would come to look for him. All at once a new idea flashed through his mind. "What I can't do," thought he, "might be done by M. de Breulh—he might easily send and make inquiries."

He fortunately had the baron's card in his pocket, and after deciphering the address as best he could, he hurried away. M. de Breulh-Faverlay resided in a splendid mansion in the Avenue de l'Impératrice, where, he declared, he was by no means commodiously lodged; however, his horses had air and space; they were comfortable, and as for himself, it did not matter. When André entered the courtyard, he perceived a carriage waiting there. Four or five footmen were talking and laughing in the well lighted hall. He went straight towards them.

"I wish to see Monsieur de Breulh," he said.

The lackeys surveyed him from head to foot with mingled contempt and surprise. "Monsieur has gone out," they replied at last, "and will not return till very late."

André understood them, well enough, and having by this time recovered his senses, he again drew forth M. de Breulh's card, and with a pencil wrote thereon these five words. "One minute—a service—André."

"Take this," said he, "and give it to your master as soon as he comes in."

He then went slowly down the steps. He was sure M. de Breulh was at home, and would send in pursuit of him, as soon as he received the card. He was not mistaken, for five minutes later, a valet ushered him into the baron's library.

At sight of André, De Breulh divined that a catastrophe had occurred. "What is it?" he asked hastily.

"Sabine is dying," answered the young painter, who at once proceeded to recount all that had happened since he had seen the baron a few hours previously.

"But what can I do, my poor fellow, to put an end to your uncertainty and anxiety?"

"You, sir? Why, you can send and inquire at M. de Mussidan's house."

"Think a moment, yesterday, I wrote to M. de Mussidan to break off my marriage with his daughter. It would be unpardonable impertinence on my part to send now and inquire after the young lady's health. It would really amount to saying, 'I have withdrawn, and so your daughter is dying of grief.'"

"You are right," muttered André, who had not thought of all this.

M. de Breulh was almost as worried as the young painter, and asked himself, how it would be possible to ascertain the truth as to Sabine's condition. For some minutes he remained absorbed in reflection. "Ah! Eureka!" cried he suddenly, "I have it. I am a distant relative of a lady, who is also a relative of the Mussidans—the Vicountesse de Bois d'Ardon. She will be delighted to serve us; she is a foolish young creature, but she has a golden heart. Come, my carriage is in the courtyard."

The footmen were amazed to see their master on such terms of intimacy with this young man in a blouse, and when the carriage drove off at full speed, an old, white-haired valet, the Nestor of the servants hall, expressed his opinion that something mysterious was going on.

Not a word was exchanged by André and M. de Breulh during their brief drive to Madame de Bois d'Ardon's mansion in the Champs Elysées. The carriage had not fairly stopped, when the baron alighted. "Wait for me," said he to André; "I will be back in a moment."

In one bound he reached the house. "Is madame at home?" he asked of the servants who knew him.

"Madame receives," was the stately reply.

Fair and dimpled, fresh and ever smiling—red haired, since red hair was the fashion—with the loveliest eyes in the world, Madame de Bois d'Ardon was considered one of the most charming women in Paris. She was thirty. She knew everything, had seen everything, feared nothing, and talked incessantly, with considerable spirit and cleverness, and a dash of roguish malice as well. She spent forty thousand francs a year, on her toilette; but when she said to her husband, "I have not a dress to put on my back," she spoke the truth, for she ruined everything she wore in less than no time. She was careless even to imprudence, and scandal-mongers pretended she had had a dozen lovers since her marriage; but this was altogether false, for she had never had a single one. She really adored her husband, and was horribly afraid of him! He knew it, but kept the knowledge to himself, for he was wise. He allowed the viscountess to flit hither and thither like a puppet at the end of a wire; but he held the wire with a firm hand. Such was the woman towards whom a footman, in a livery too showy to be in good taste, now conducted M. de Breulh.

Madame de Bois d'Ardon was in her boudoir when the baron was announced. She had just fixed the last pin in her toilette—the fifth she had made that day, and to kill time, she was examining a coquettish costume of a vivandière of the time of Louis Quinze—a *chef d'œuvre* of Van Klopen's—which she meant to assume on returning from the Opera,—for a fancy ball at the Austrian embassy.

On seeing M. de Breulh she uttered an exclamation of delight. Although they rarely met except in society, they were really very much attached to each other. In their youthful days they had been in the habit of passing a month each summer at the château of their uncle the old Count de Faverlay, and now as then they familiarly called each other by their Christian names.

"You here at this hour, Gontran!" cried the viscountess. "It is a miracle, a dream—" The words died on her lips as she caught sight of her visitor's pale, harassed countenance. "What is the matter?" she asked. "Is there any trouble?"

"Not yet, I hope; but I am very anxious. I have just heard that Mademoiselle de Mussidan is dangerously ill.

"Is it possible! Poor Sabine! What is the matter with her?"

"I don't know, and that is precisely why I have come here. I want you, Clotilde, to send one of your people at once to Mussidan's house, to ascertain what truth there is in what we have heard."

Madame de Bois d'Ardon stared at the baron with amazement: "Are you jesting?" she asked. "Why don't you send yourself?"

"I can't, and if you are charitable and kind, you won't even ask me why. In the first place, I should not tell you the truth. In the next, I wish you to promise me faithfully never to mention to anyone that I have asked you to do this."

Although this mysterious answer keenly whetted Madame de Bois d'Ardon's curiosity, she proved momentarily discreet, and did not ask another question. "So be it then," said she, "I respect your secret. I would go this moment only Bois d'Ardon would scold me for letting him sit down to dinner alone. But as soon as the meal is over, I'll go."

"Thanks! a thousand thanks; and now I'll go home and wait for news from you."

"By no means. Stay here and dine."

"Impossible, a friend is waiting for me, at the door."

The viscountess knew from De Breulh's tone that it would be useless for her to insist. However, she mentally resolved to inquire, sooner or later, into this mystery. "Do as you please, then," she said with well affected carelessness. "I will send you a note this evening."

De Breulh pressed her hand, and hurried away. At the door of the house he found André, who had been pacing restlessly up and down, not being able to sit still in the carriage. "Keep up your courage, my friend," said the baron. Madame de Bois d'Ardon knows nothing of Mademoiselle Sabine's illness. This, of course, speaks well, for if it were serious, she would no doubt have been informed. At all events we shall know the truth in three hours.

"Three hours!" groaned André in the same tone, as he might have said, "three centuries."

"It is a long time, I admit, but we will talk of her while we wait, for you must not leave me, but rather come home and share my dinner."

André nodded assent. He had no energy left to contest any point; he seemed almost benumbed.

If M. de Breulh's servants had been surprised to see their master go out with the young man in the blouse, they were utterly stupefied when they saw them return together; and the adventure assumed fantastic proportions in their eyes, when their haughty master sat down to dinner with André in the magnificent dining-room, ordering the very butler to withdraw, so as to be more at ease. The dinner was exquisite, but the two men were in no humour to appreciate it. They wielded their knives and forks mechanically, and drank as little as they ate. Over and over again, they endeavoured to speak on indifferent topics, but it was in vain. They so fully realised the inutilty of their efforts that after dinner, when coffee was served in the library, they relapsed into profound silence. Their present situation after what had occurred that afternoon was odd enough, but carried away by the rapidity of events they did not remark its strangeness. André never once took his eyes from the clock, while de Breulh sat staring fixedly into the fire. At last, just as ten was striking, they heard a noise in the vestibule—a sound of voices, and the rustling of silk skirts. M. de Breulh was starting up when the door opened, and Madame de Bois d'Ardon entered like a whirlwind. "It is I," she exclaimed.

It was certainly far from correct for a married lady to visit a bachelor's abode at that late hour, but the viscountess generally did as she pleased. "I have come here, Gontran," she resumed with extraordinary vehemence, "to tell you what I think of your conduct; it is simply—abominable, unworthy of a gentleman."

"Clotilde!"

"Be quiet! you are a monster. Ah! yes, now I understand why you didn't dare send to inquire about poor Sabine. You knew very well what the effect of your letter would be."

M. de Breulh smiled, and turning to André remarked: "What did I tell you?"

This observation awoke Madame de Bois d'Ardon to the fact that a stranger was present. She took it for granted that she had committed

some terrible indiscretion. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, starting back, "I thought you were alone."

"It is the same as if I were," answered the baron gravely; "this gentleman is a very dear friend from whom I have no secrets." So saying he laid his hand on André's arm.

"Allow me, my dear Clotilde," he added, "to introduce to you Monsieur André, a painter whose name is unknown to-day, but will be famous to-morrow."

André bowed profoundly, but the viscountess for once in her life was silenced. This intimate friend's white blouse utterly confounded her. And why this peculiar introduction?

"Then," resumed M. de Breulh, "our information was correct." He lightly accented the "our." "Mademoiselle de Mussidan is really ill?"

"Alas!"

"Did you see her?" asked the baron.

"Yes, I saw her, Gontran. Had you been with me your heart would have melted, you would have regretted this fatal rupture as well. Poor Sabine, she did not know me. She did not even know I was in the room. She lay in bed whiter than the sheets, as cold and as stiff as a statue, her eyes open wide, and for twenty hours she has been in this condition. One would have thought she was dead but for the tears which every few minutes rolled down her cheeks."

André had intended to repress every sign of emotion in presence of the viscountess, but his feelings were stronger than his will. "Ah!" cried he, "she will die; I know it perfectly well."

His tone was so full of anguish that the light-hearted lady was touched. "I assure you, sir," she said, "that you exaggerate the situation. There is no danger—none at present, at all events. The physicians call it a kind of catalepsy, and say it is by no means an uncommon occurrence with nervous persons on receiving a sudden shock."

"But what shock could it have been in this case?" asked André.

The viscountess did not reply. She turned towards her cousin, her eyes all aglow with curiosity. What on earth had this man in a workman's blouse to do with Sabine, and how did he happen to be there! "No one told me," she said at last, "that Sabine's illness was caused by the rupture of her marriage arrangements, but I took it for granted—"

"And you were very much mistaken," interrupted M. de Breulh, "I know what I say, my dear cousin, and it is for this very reason that I am so much alarmed. But you have told us nothing after all, Clotilde; what has really happened?"

M. de Breulh's calmness and assurance, and a glance he exchanged with André, began to enlighten the viscountess. "I asked every question I dared," she replied, "but the answers were exceedingly vague. Sabine looked as if she were dead: her father and mother hovered about round her bed like two ghosts. If they had killed her themselves with their own hands, remorse could not have been stamped more clearly on their faces. They absolutely terrified me—"

M. de Breulh interrupted the viscountess, impatiently. "Tell me precisely what were the answers to your questions," said he.

"I will tell you. First, it seems that Sabine had been so agitated all the morning, that her mother asked her if she were ill."

"We know that; and we also know the reason of it."

"Ah!" ejaculated the viscountess with an amazed stare. "In the after-

noon you saw Sabine, it seems. Where she went or where she was after you left her no one seems to know, but they have positive proof that she neither left the house nor received any letter. At all events, it was nearly an hour before she returned to her room, where her maid, a nice girl who is devoted to her, sat sewing. Sabine said something to this girl, Modeste, who looked up, and seeing her mistress so pale ran towards her. Just as she reached her, Sabine swayed and fell with a wild shriek. She was taken up and laid on her bed, and she has been in the state I described ever since—she has neither spoken nor moved."

André listened with all eagerness to Madame de Bois d'Ardon. His imagination depicted Sabine as the viscountess had seen her. De Brouilh, who was more self-possessed, watched his cousin keenly, trying as it were to penetrate her thoughts, for it seemed to him that she was keeping something back. "Come, that's not everything," he said at last.

"Yes it is."

"Would you swear it?"

The viscountess started and averted her eyes. "I don't understand you," she said, nervously. "Why do you look at me in that way?"

M. de Breulh hesitated. He had had great experience of life, and he knew, for he had learned it at his own cost, that a man ought always to distrust those deceitful appearances which simpletons call the evidence of facts. And yet before venturing on a line of conduct which might have serious consequences, he reflected and hesitated, and to conceal his embarrassment, began to pace the room. A moment's unpleasant silence followed; but suddenly he stopped short in front of the viscountess, who was sitting beside the fire. "My dear Clotilde," he said, "I presume I am telling you nothing new when I say that you have been woefully slandered at times."

"Pooh! What do I care."

"But I assure you I have always judged you more fairly than the world. You are the incarnation of imprudence. Your presence here at this hour is proof of the truth of this assertion. You are worldly, frivolous, headstrong, and very, very foolish; but you are also, as I very well know, a thoroughly good woman at heart; true as steel, and brave as well."

"What are you driving at, Gontran?"

"At this, Clotilde: I think there would be no risk in confiding to you a secret which involves the honour of, and perhaps the lives of several persons."

Much more agitated than she wished to appear, Clotilde rose to her feet.

"Thank you, Gontran," she said, quietly, "you have judged me truly."

But André, who now understood Monsieur de Breulh, came forward.

"Have you a right to speak?" he asked.

"My dear André," answered his host, "my honour is as much involved in this matter as yours is. Will you not trust me?" Then turning towards the viscountess, he added: "First of all, tell us the whole of it."

"Oh, the whole is very little, and only something I learned from Modeste. It seems you had hardly left Mademoiselle de Mussidan, when Monsieur de Clinchan arrived."

"Clinchan—an old maniac, eh? A friend of the count's, I believe?"

"Precisely; they had a—well, what shall I call it?—so frightful a quarrel together, that finally Do Clinchan was taken ill, and it was only with great difficulty that he was able to get to his carriage."

"Ah! That's rather odd."

"Wait a moment. After Clinchan had left, Octave and his wife had a scene. You know my cousin—his voice thundered through the house. It was while this was going on that Sabine reached her room, more dead than alive, and Modeste thinks she had perhaps heard something her father and mother were saying."

Each word the viscountess spoke strengthened De Breulh's suspicions. "You see, Clotilde," he exclaimed, "there is something strange about all this, and you will think it so all the more when you know everything." Thereupon, without omitting a single detail of any importance, he told her André's and Sabine's story.

Madame de Bois d'Ardon quivered as she listened—quivered with mingled apprehension and pleasure. She was anxious for Sabine and André, but she was delighted to have her curiosity satisfied. "Forgive me," said she, holding out her hand as soon as her cousin ceased speaking, "my reproaches and accusations were most unjust. I am indeed of your opinion, yes, there is some strange mystery in all this."

"And something, I fear, which will put another obstacle in our friend André's path."

"Why do you say that?" asked the young painter, aghast.

"I can't tell. It is a mere presentiment. But now mark my words. At Sabine's request I have withdrawn all pretensions to her hand, in your favour, but I will not leave the field open to any intruder. Mademoiselle de Mussidan would not be my wife. She must be yours."

"Yes," said the viscountess, "but how are we to know what has happened?"

"We will discover it in some way or other—that is to say, if you are with us, if you consent to help us."

All women are delighted to be able to dabble in matrimonial affairs, and the viscountess was particularly pleased to have a hand in an affair that had opened so romantically. Far from discouraging her, the obstacles quickened her interest. Would not this be an excellent opportunity to prove once more the superiority of feminine penetration and diplomacy? She would have to fight, intrigue, and negotiate, envelop herself in mystery. How delightful! "I am entirely at your disposal," she said. "Have you arranged any plan?"

"No, not as yet, but one shall be soon adopted. So far as Mademoiselle de Mussidan is concerned, it would be folly to act otherwise than with the utmost frankness. Let us address ourselves to her directly. André will write to her and ask for an explanation, and if she is better to-morrow you will see her and give her the note."

The proposal was certainly bold, and many women would scarcely have cared for the suggested errand. However, the viscountess did not trouble herself particularly about the proprieties. "I don't think that would do," she said, with a pretty little air of affected wisdom. "In fact I think it would be a very unwise thing to do."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm sure of it; but let Monsieur André decide."

André now came forward. While M. de Breulh and the viscountess were conversing, he had fully recovered his self-possession. It was time he should intervene; the moment was a decisive one. "I think you are right, madame," said he. "It would be imprudent to let Mademoiselle de Mussidan see so suddenly that we have confided a secret which is her's, even more than ours, to another person."

The viscountess nodded approval.

"There is, I think, a safer and more simple plan," resumed André. "If to-morrow morning Madame la Viscomtesse would ask Mademoiselle de Mussidan's maid, Modeste, to meet me at noon at the corner of the Avenue de Matignon, she will find me there. From her I shall no doubt be able to obtain precise information."

"That's an excellent idea," declared Madame de Bois d'Ardon, "Early to-morrow I will call at the Mussidan's and deliver your message."

She stopped short, and uttered a pretty little shriek as looking at the clock, she perceived it was nearly midnight. "Heavens!" she cried, rising hastily, "and I have to go to a ball at the Austrian embassy, and am not even dressed!" Then with a coquettish gesture, she drew her shawl round her shoulders and darted away, exclaiming as she hurried down the stairs: "I will call here, Gontran, to-morrow, on my way to the Bois." Her movements were so rapid, that before M. de Breulh could ring, or even follow her, she was gone.

Now, somewhat easier in mind, André and his host talked for a long time over the fire with all the freedom of friends, who having suffered together, had a common object in view. They had only known each other for a few hours, but they parted like two old comrades, whose affection, founded on mutual esteem, took no account of services rendered and received. M. de Breulh wished to send André home in his carriage, but the young artist refused. However, the baron prevailed on him to accept the loan of a hat and an overcoat. "To-morrow," murmured André as he walked home, "to-morrow Modeste will tell me everything, that is providing that kind-hearted, though frivolous, Madame de Bois d'Ardon does not forget her promise during the night."

But Madame de Bois d'Ardon could be in earnest sometimes. When she returned from the ball at the Austrian embassy, she did not go to bed, lest she might not awake in time to be at the Mussidan's before ten o'clock, and so when André reached the rendezvous, he found Modeste awaiting him. Her pale face and reddened eyes showed how she suffered for her young mistress. "Sabine," said she, "had not regained consciousness. The family physician did not express any anxiety, but he had asked for a consultation."

That was everything. André pressed Modeste with questions, but she could tell him nothing more; she had in reality imparted all the information she possessed to the viscountess. However, it was agreed between the young artist and the maid that they should meet each morning and evening at the same spot.

For two days longer Sabine's situation remained unchanged, and André grew desperate. He spent all his time in hurrying to the Rue de Matignon, and thence to M. de Breulh's, where he often met Madame de Bois d'Ardon. On the third day, when he met Modeste in the morning, he found her in great despair. The cataleptic attack was over, but Sabine was now struggling against a nervous fever.

The faithful maid and André were so absorbed in their grief that they did not notice one of the Mussidan servants who passed them—that very valet Florestan, who was on his way to the post with a letter for B. Mascarot. "So Modeste," said André, in a low voice, "she is in danger, you say—very great danger?"

"The doctor declared it would be decided this evening whether she would live or die. Be here at five to-night."

André tottered away, overcome with grief; and when he reached De Brouilh's house, he was so strange and excited that his friend insisted on his lying down and trying to sleep. Finally, when five o'clock came, De Brouilh insisted on going with him to see Modeste. They had not reached the meeting-place when they perceived her hurrying towards them. "She sleeps!" exclaimed the maid, "and the doctors say she is saved!"

André staggered, and M. de Brouilh assisted him to a bench, on which he sank in an almost unconscious state. They never imagined that they were being observed—and yet, twenty yards off, two men—B. Mascarot and Florestan—were eagerly watching all their movements.

Alarmed by the valet's letter, the agent had jumped into Dr. Hortebize's brougham, waiting at the door in the Rue Montorgueil, and ordered the coachman to drive at full speed to Father Canon's establishment, where at that time of day he fully expected to find Florestan. However, he was mistaken. Mascarot was far too anxious to entertain the idea of waiting, and so he at once despatched a messenger to fetch the valet from the Hôtel de Mussidan.

The worthy agent did not breathe freely until he learnt that a change for the better had supervened in Sabine's condition, and that she was probably saved. He had been asking himself if the edifice he had reared after twenty years' labour and intriguing would not crumble before his eyes into a thousand pieces. Now, however, he was somewhat reassured. Still he frowned when Florestan told him of the daily interviews between Modeste and the young man whom he called mademoiselle's lover.

"Ah!" muttered Mascarot, "I should very much like to witness one of these interviews if only from a distance."

"And why not, sir?" asked Florestan, drawing from his pocket a dainty little watch, which his sweetheart no doubt had made him a present of. "It can be easily managed. They usually meet about this time, and always at the same spot—"

"Come then," interrupted his patron.

They went out, but thinking it wiser to avoid being seen together in the neighbourhood of M. de Mussidan's house, they took a circuitous route to the Champs Elysées. Near the corner of the Avenue de Matignon, close to the Cirque de l'Impératrice, were half-a-dozen of those little wooden shanties where old women sell cakes and toys in summer time.

"Let us go behind one of these," said Florestan, "we shall easily see them from here."

Night was coming on, and the lamplighters were already hurrying to and fro at the further end of the Avenue. Still people and things might yet be plainly distinguished. The worthy pair had waited in their hiding-place for some minutes when suddenly Florestan whispered, "Look! there comes Modeste, and now the lover. But he has a friend with him to-night. What on earth can she be telling them? He seems as if he were fainting. Do you see?"

B. Mascarot saw only too well, and the scene, so passionate and tragic, highly displeased him. It is always a perilous task to trifle with the happiness of a man who really loves. "And so," said the agent crossly, "that great fellow gasping and floundering on the bench there is your young lady's lover?"

"Precisely, sir."

"Then we must find out exactly who and what he is," muttered Mascarot.

Florestan assumed the wise look of a diplomatist, and chuckled softly.

"Oh! you know all about him, then?" asked his patron.

"To be sure I do," answered the valet. "The day before yesterday I was smoking my pipe outside the gate of the house when I saw this young game-cock come down the street, but he didn't hold his crest high, I assure you. However, I knew what it meant—if my young lady, for instance, was ill, I should drag one foot along after the other just as he did. Well, I thought as I had nothing else to do I would just find out who he was, and so I strolled after him with my hands in my pockets. He walked and walked till he quite tired me; but at last he entered a house, and I, too, close at his heels. I went to the concierge, pulled my tobacco pouch out of my pocket, and showed it her, saying 'I have just picked this up—that gentleman who has just come in dropped it. Do you know him?'"

"Of course I do," she answered, "he is an artist on the fourth floor—Monsieur André."

"But that was in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne?" interrupted Mascarot.

"Precisely!" rejoined the valet somewhat abashed; and he added sulkily, as though he thought he had been trifled with, "you are better informed than I am, it seems."

Mascarot was too surprised to make any rejoinder. He was struck by the strange persistence with which this same young artist came across all his plans and combinations. When the cook in the employment of Rose—now Vicomtesse Zora de Chantemille, by the grace of Gaston de Gandelu—had spoken to him of an artist, who was acquainted with the liaison of Rose and Paul Violaine, he had made it his immediate business to find out who that artist was. Tantine had made inquiries, and even interviewed Madame Poileveu, the discreet concierge of the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and now Mascarot discovered that this same artist was Mademoiselle de Mussidan's lover. What a strange and ominous coincidence. "Well," said Mascarot at last, "you took your tobacco pouch back from the concierge again, didn't you?"

"Why, no, sir," answered Florestan, "I said I had found it, and of course I had to leave it with her."

"Imprudent! most imprudent!"

"But why?" asked Florestan. "What harm can it do?"

Mascarot hesitated, and finally answered, "Oh, none at all, of course." He did not care to tell the fellow the truth, and yet, he was intensely annoyed that this proof of an unordered investigation should be left in Madame Poileveu's hands. The merest trifle suffices to put astute persons on the track of the most complicated intrigue. Wasn't it a mere scrap of paper which had been wrapped round a candle, that enabled Canler to ferret out the band of the Rue Saint Denis? Wasn't it a thimbleful of cigar ashes found on a mantleself that betrayed Corvinsi to M. Lecoq? "Such trifles," muttered Mascarot to himself, "often ruin a man."

But André now attracted all his attention; the young artist appeared to be himself again, and was speaking with great animation. Modeste seemed horror-struck; for she shrank back and raised her arms to heaven.

"But who is the other man?" whispered Mascarot, "he looks like an Englishman."

"Why, don't you know him? It's M. de Breulh-Faverlay."

"Bless my soul! Do you mean the man who was to have married Mademoiselle Sabine?"

"Of course I do."

Now, B. Mascarat was one of those adventurers whom nothing disconcerts or astonishes as a rule, and yet, on making this discovery, he instinctively shuddered as with alarm, and swore a frightful oath. "By the thunder of heaven!" he cried at last, "are De Breulh and this painter friends?"

"That's more than I know; you are very curious, it seems to me."

That Mascarat was not altogether himself was shown by this very question, for it was perfectly evident that the pair were on terms of the closest intimacy. Modeste had now left them, and they themselves turned in the direction of the Avenue de l'Impératrice, walking arm in arm.

"It looks as if M. de Breulh had easily consoled himself for his dismissal," remarked Mascarat.

"Dismissed!" said Florestan, "he wasn't dismissed! it was he who wrote and withdrew his suit."

This time Mascarat had strength enough to conceal what a blow the valet's information was. He even laughed as he asked some trifling questions of Florestan before they separated. But he was in reality absolutely upset. He had looked on his game as won, and now he saw it, not lost, but at all events frightfully compromised. "What!" muttered he, clenching his hands with rage. "Shall a lad's foolish passion stop me now, when I am so near the goal? By no means. Let him beware. If I find him in my road, so much the worse for him!"

XXI.

DR. HORTERIZE had long since ceased to dispute the will of his admirable partner. Baptistin ordered, and—he obeyed! He had been bidden not to lose sight of Paul; and he complied with the instructions to the letter. He had gone with him to M. Martin Rigal's—where they had dined, although the banker himself was absent—thence to his club, and he had insisted on offering Paul hospitality for the night. The physician and his ward having retired at a late hour, were also late in rising, but shortly before eleven in the morning, having washed and dressed, they were about to do justice to an excellent breakfast, when M. Tantaine was announced, and made his appearance, bowing and smiling as usual.

At the sight of this man, who had first impelled him towards crime, Paul felt his blood boil, and started furiously to his feet. "I have you, sir, at last," he exclaimed. "We have an account to settle together!"

Good old Tantaine looked as if the skies had opened. "We! an account?" he asked, in a bewildered sort of way.

"Yes, sir, yes! Was it not owing to your perfidious conduct that I was accused of theft by Madame Loupias?"

"Well, what then?"

"Was it not you who came to me in my garret?"

The old clerk shrugged his shoulders. "I thought," said he, in the blandest tone, "that Monsieur Baptistin had explained everything to you, and concluded that you wished to marry Mademoiselle Flavia. I was told that you were a young man of extraordinary intelligence and penetration!"

The doctor burst into a hearty laugh, and Paul realising the folly of his indignation at this late hour, dropped his head in due confusion, and turned away.

"If I disturb you, doctor," resumed old Tantaine, "I am very sorry, but I was sent here specially by the governor."

"Is there anything new?"

"Yes. First of all, Mademoiselle de Mussidan is out of danger. M. de Croisenois can pursue his plans now without any fear. An obstacle has turned up but it will be suppressed."

The doctor swallowed a glass of his excellent Bordeaux, smacked his lips, and exclaimed: "Well, here's to the conjugal felicity of the marquis and Mademoiselle Sabine!"

"Amen!" answered Tantaine. "Another word, if you please. I am told to beg M. Paul not to leave M. Hortebize, but to send for his effects at his hotel, and install himself here." The doctor looked so annoyed that Tantaine hastened to add, "Only temporarily, of course. I am commissioned to find an apartment for this young gentleman—and directed to furnish it. He can't remain in lodgings. It's too compromising."

Paul made no attempt to conceal his satisfaction at this new arrangement. To be surrounded by his own goods and chattels would be a tangible proof of prosperity.

"Very good!" cried the doctor, gaily. "And now that you have executed all your commissions, Tantaine, you can stay and breakfast with an easy conscience."

But Tantaine shook his head. "Many thanks for the honour; but I have already breakfasted. Besides, I have no time to spare. That business of the Duc de Champdoce presses us frightfully just now, and I must see that camp Perpignan as soon as possible."

He here made a little sign which Paul did not see, and Hortebize rose and accompanied him into the ante-room.

"Don't leave that boy," said Tantaine, in a whisper, "I will see him to-morrow. In the meantime, warm him up, prepare him!"

"I understand," rejoined the doctor. "Trust him to me;" and as he resumed his seat he called out to Tantaine—at that moment opening the outer door: "My regards to that dear fellow, Perpignan!"

That dear fellow, Perpignan, whom Mascarot had suspected of hovering round about Caroline Schimmel, the cook, and whom Father Tantaine was now going to see, was well known in Paris—and as some folks said, too well known. His name had been set down in the baptismal register as Isidore Crocheteau, but he had adopted the name of his native town. In 1845 or thereabouts, he had met with a disaster. Head cook at a restaurant in the Palais-Royal he had been detected in a flagrant system of dishonesty in connection with the tradespeople who supplied the establishment, was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. During his incarceration, however, he was able to mature a grand scheme, by which he thought he could enrich himself without the smallest risk. A week after being set free he issued the following prospectus:

[*Private and Confidential.*]

I. C. PERPIGNAN.

Private Inquiries. Searches and Surveillance.

SECRECY GUARANTEED.

SIR,—Everyone at some time of life has needed a skilful and discreet agent to whom he could confide certain investigations of a delicate and mysterious nature. Creditors anxious to discover absconding debtors, fathers anxious as to the conduct of their prodigal sons, families wishing for

information concerning one of their relatives, in one word, all who desire to investigate moral investigations, justifiable inquiries and searches, may apply in all confidence to M. PERPIGNAN, whose ability is universally acknowledged, and whose honourability is above all question.

Terms by private contract.

By this impudent circular Perpignan announced the creation of one of those shameful private police establishments, which are only employed by knaves and fools.

Perpignan wished for a specialty—he had one. He became the Providence of jealous husbands! The ex-cook's scheme succeeded so well that at the expiration of the first year he was employing no fewer than eight of those odious spies called "*filcurs*" in the Rue de Jerusalem. It is true that he played a double game, unscrupulously selling his merchandise twice over. Whenever he was charged with watching some suspected wife he would call on her and say: "I am promised so much if I discover and tell the truth. Now, what will you give me if I agree to furnish only such information as you choose?"

It was in the field of private inquiries and investigations that on two or three occasions Perpignan's men had rubbed against Mascarot's agents. There was never any real conflict between them, for each side was afraid of the other, and by a tacit agreement as it were, they decided in future to avoid working the same tracks. But, while the ex-cook—badly served by his light-paid spies—had never succeeded in penetrating any of Mascarot's mysteries, the latter, on the contrary, admirably seconded by his volunteers, was by no means ignorant of Perpignan's affairs.

Mascarot, had, at the outset realised, that the receipts of the Private Inquiry Office could not possibly cover Perpignan's expenses, for he lived in a brilliant style "protecting" a young woman of the *corps de ballet*, and hiring a brougham by the month. He also affected artistic tastes, which revealed themselves in the form of wonderful waistcoats and superfluous jewellery. He, moreover, admitted his partiality for good living, could never dine without drinking the best wines, and seldom, if ever, turned a cold shoulder on a gambling table. He delighted to exhibit himself, was always to be seen at the races, and in the Bois—frequented the best restaurants, and was invariably present at the first performances of the new pieces at the theatres.

"Where does his money come from?" wondered Mascarot, determined not to rest until he knew. And the worthy agent had immediately set to work, and thanks to his special means of investigation had speedily learnt the truth.

"That's how we told him," mused Father Taintaine, as leaving Hortebize's house, he turned in the direction of Perpignan's Private Inquiry Office in the Rue du Four. "Ay, we hold him, luckily for us, for master Perpignan's a dangerous rascal and might at any time do us harm if we could not threaten him with a nice little pleasure trip to Cayenne."

The old clerk had reached the ex-cook's door, (decorated with a huge brass plate) and rang the bell. A low-looking, stout old woman, at once answered the summons: "Monsieur Perpignan is out," said she.

"And when will he return?"

"Not before night, I think."

"Then will you kindly tell me where I may hope to find him, as it is of importance to him, as well as to me, that we should see each other as soon as possible?"

"He did not tell me where he was going."

"Isn't he at the factory?" asked Tantaine, with an air of excessive simplicity.

The stout woman was so little prepared for this question that she started back. "How do you know that?" she stammered.

"I do know it, and that's enough, so you may as well tell me the truth at once. Is he there?"

"Yes—I think so."

"Thanks; I will find him then." And less polite than usual, Tantaine hastily turned away, omitting to bow to the woman.

"Too bad!" he muttered, "too bad! An endless distance! But if I unexpectedly catch him there, at his honest, honourable work, he'll be off his guard no doubt, and let his tongue wag on more readily. So let us walk it."

The worthy old fellow talked of walking, but in point of fact, he flew over the ground, turning up the Rue de Tournon, crossing the Luxembourg gardens and diving into the Rue Gay-Lussac. And still at the same abnormal pace, his thin legs bounded along the Rue des Feuillantines into the Rue Mouffetard, where at last he made a halt. Not for long, however. He had soon reconnoitred his position and turned into one of the narrow tortuous by-ways surrounding the Gobelins Works and the Hospital de l'Ourine. This is a strange district which most Parisians do not even know of. A man might imagine himself at a thousand leagues from the Boulevard Montmartre as he treads the streets, or rather roads, inaccessible to vehicles, and bordered here and there with old tumble down houses and garden walls falling to ruin. From the Ruelle des Gobelins the scene is striking. In the valley below, one can distinguish the black, muddy semi-stagnant waters of the Bièvre. Factories with their tall, smoke crowned chimneys, tanneries and their adjacent out-buildings, where the newly dressed hides hang drying, rise up on all sides; and here and there among clumps of trees a hovel or a shanty may be distinguished, with occasionally some five-storeyed dwelling-house, looking singularly woo begone and out of place in such a neighbourhood. On the left stretches the populous and busy Rue Mouffetard, while on the right rise the plane trees of the outer Boulevards.

Beyond the Place d'Italie, a line of poplars, marking the course of the Bièvre, limits the horizon; but turn round, and all Paris is stretched out before you. Father Tantaine involuntarily paused and looked, and some strange, mysterious thought brought a bitter smile to his lips. However, a moment later, he shrugged his shoulders and hurried on his way. He seemed quite at home in the neighbourhood, never hesitating, but following with an air of complete assurance these tortuous lanes. Diving into that break-neck alley, the Ruelle des Reculettes, he passed the Rue Croulebarbe, and at last, reaching the Rue du Champ de l'Alouette, he heaved a sigh of satisfaction and muttered, "Well, here we are at last."

He had paused in front of a three-storeyed house of large proportions, faced by a court-yard, with a rotten, wooden fence. The building was a detached one, the spot was lonely, almost sinister. Father Tantaine deliberated for a moment, and then, crossing the court-yard where a tethered goat was browsing at some weeds, he entered the house. The ground floor comprised only two rooms, in one of which the floor was strewn with straw, covered with ragged rugs and blankets. In the other room, apparently a kitchen, a couple of long boards resting on trestles formed a kind of table. Before the range stood a hideous old hag with a flaming com-

plexion, the result of unlimited libations, and a pair of *forret's* eyes gleaming with cruelty and cunning. She wore a coloured kerchief on her head, and in one hand held a wooden spoon with which she stirred some horrible mixture simmering in an immense cauldron. On a pallet in one corner, a little urchin, some ten years old, lay shivering. Against the ragged pillow-case, black with dirt, his face of a death-like palidity appeared in bold relief. His little hands were painfully thin, and fever glittered in his big black eyes. At times his sufferings made him moan, but at once the old hag turned round and threatened him with her wooden spoon.

"Shut up, will you, you young rascal!" she cried.

"But I am in such pain," sighed the boy, with a marked Italian accent.

"I am really very ill—"

"Well, why didn't you work as you were bid? You wouldn't have had a thrashing if you had brought some money home. And if you hadn't been beaten you wouldn't be lying there!"

"Oh me! I'm sick—I'm cold—I want to go away—I want to see mamma!"

Old Tantine had seen much misery in his life, and was not easily moved, but even he was touched by this scene. He coughed to announce his presence, whereupon the old woman turned round with a snarl like that of a hungry dog disturbed over a bone.

"Who do you want?" she growled.

"The governor."

"He hasn't come yet."

"Will he be here?"

"Perhaps—it's his day; but he's not by any means regular. However, you can see M. Poluche."

"Poluche! Who's he?"

The old woman gave Tantine a contemptuous glance. It seemed to her most extraordinary that such ignorance could exist. "He's the professor," she answered.

"And where is he?"

"He? Why, upstairs in the schoolroom, of course." And turning to her cauldron, the contents of which were boiling over, she added, "That's enough questioning. Just show me your heels, please."

This curt dismissal did not seem to any wise to offend Tantine. However, before climbing the stairs he examined them, and noticed that the bannisters had been torn away, and that they were altogether in a most rickety condition. But Father Tantine was brave, and so he cautiously climbed them, keeping as closely as possible to the wall. The higher he went the more distinct became certain strange sounds which he had already heard in the court-yard. It seemed as if a number of cats were mewing whilst a knife-grinder busily plied his calling. Every now and then there came a dead silence, followed by a loud oath and cries of pain. However, this *charivari* did not seem to astonish Tantine, who, on reaching the floor above, found himself in front of a door hanging loosely by one hinge. He pushed this door open, and entered what the old hag downstairs had called the schoolroom. It was an immense apartment; in fact, all the rooms on the floor had apparently been thrown into one, the partitions having been torn down. There were five windows with but three panes of glass intact; the others were cracked and broken; some of them covered with rags and paper, and all absolutely begrimed with filth. On the white plastered walls figured innumerable inscriptions and rough drawings, often obscene, whilst

the room had a sickly disgusting smell which caught one at the throat and almost provoked nausea. The only article of furniture was a broken chair, across which lay a stout riding-whip.

Father Tantaine had met with some strange sights in the course of his wanderings through the low quarters of Paris, and yet he paused on the threshold of this room, fairly thunderstruck. All round against the wall, a score of young urchins, from seven to ten years old, were ranged—all of them clad in rags and tatters, and filthy beyond description. Some of them were arrayed in old frock-coats, the tails of which dragged on the floor, whilst others had trousers, the waistbands of which well nigh reached their throats. None of them wore such a thing as a shirt; socks were apparently unknown to them, and several were absolutely bare-footed. They mostly carried violins in their hands, a few of them supporting harps taller than themselves. On the violins Tantaine noticed a number of chalk-lines at regular intervals.

In the centre of the room stood a man of about thirty—straight, slim, and erect as a candle; excessively ugly, with flat features, and greasy black hair falling over his neck behind. His coat, originally olive-green, hung on his shoulders as if on a couple of pegs. Like the children, he held a violin, and Father Tantaine at once divined that this must be Professor Poluche giving his lesson.

"Attention!" cried the *maître*. "Now each in turn. Ascanio, just play the refrain of the *Chapeau de la Marguerite* over again, and in measure, *viad*." So saying the professor began to sing and play, whilst the child he had named scraped his violin in desperation, and with the nasal twang of Piedmont screeched, "Ah, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! qu'il est beau, le chapeau de—"

"Rascal!" interrupted Poluche. "Haven't I told you a hundred times that at the word '*chapeau*' you must place your left hand on the fourth notch and draw your bow. Begin again."

The child began: "Ah, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! qu'il est—"

"Stop!" shouted the professor in a threatening voice. "Stop! I believe you do it purposely. Now begin again, and if you don't repeat the whole refrain correctly, look out, that's all. Go on."

"Ah, mon Dieu—"

Alas! Ascanio had forgotten his instructions and again made a mistake. The professor laid down his violin, quietly took up the riding-whip lying across the chair, and in all calmness, without the slightest semblance of anger, cut the child five or six times across the legs, with the result that the luckless urchin at once set up a lamentable roar. "That'll teach you," said Poluche, "to pay more attention to what I say. When you have got through your howling you can begin again, and if you don't do better, you shan't have a mouthful of soup to-night. This is a fair warning. Now, instead of braying like an ass, open your eyes and ears and look at your neighbours. Now, Giuseppe, it's your turn."

Although two or three years younger than Ascanio, Giuseppe was far more skilful both with his instrument and voice, and he played and sang the whole refrain without a single mistake.

"Good!" said Poluche; "and now, if you improve as much in the next two or three days as you have done during the last week, you shall go out. You would like to go out, I suppose?"

"Oh! yes, indeed, sir," answered the child with great delight. "I should like to bring in a few sous, too."

But the conscientious professor did not mean to waste his valuable time in vain converse. He turned to another of his pupils. "Fabio," he cried, "it's your turn, and in time, remember."

Fabio, a tiny little fellow, not more than seven, whose black eyes were as bright as a mouse's, did not evince particular haste in obeying this order. The fact is, he had just caught sight of Father Tantine on the threshold, and he thought it more imperative to call the professor's attention to this intruder. "Oh! master," he exclaimed, "a man!"

Poluche at once turned, and found himself face to face with Tantine, who now came swiftly forward, his hat in his hand. A spectre darting up through the floor could not have made the professor feel more nervous. He had, indeed, especial reasons for being afraid of strangers. "What do you want?" he asked in a startled voice. "Who are you?"

The *maître's* evident alarm delighted worthy Tantine, for he looked on it as a favourable augury respecting the result of the hazardous mission he had undertaken; and, moreover, it showed him what tone he had best adopt in speaking to Perpignan when the latter arrived. Such being the case, it pleased him to prolong the perplexity of the situation, and for a good minute at least he remained smiling blandly at the discomfited professor, who was each instant becoming more anxious. However, at last he relented. "Be at ease, my good sir," said he. "I am one of your patron's intimate friends, and have only taken the liberty of calling here because I have important business affairs to discuss with him."

Poluche breathed more freely. "If that's the case, sir," he said, offering the visitor the only chair in the room—the very rickety one aforesaid, "take a seat; the master will soon be here."

But Father Tantine refused, politely protesting that he was afraid of intruding, that he did not care to sit down, and that he would withdraw rather than interrupt such an interesting lesson.

"Oh! the lesson's as good as over," replied the professor. "It is time for Mother Bator to give these scamps their porridge." And turning to his pupils, who had not dared to move, he added, "Enough for to-day. Be off with you."

The children did not wait another second. They laid down their instruments, and, like schoolboys eager for play, bounded out of the room and down the rickety stairs at the risk of breaking their necks. Perhaps they hoped that their master, occupied by his unwonted visitor, would forget certain threats he had made. The hope was vain! Professor Poluche, severe, but just, was endowed with an extraordinary memory. He went out on to the landing and called down the stairs, "Hallo! Mother Bator!"

"What's up?" asked the old hag in the kitchen.

"You will give no porridge to Morel, please, and Ravouillat is to have only half his allowance."

Having given these important orders, he returned to the schoolroom with the self-satisfied air of a person who has thoroughly performed his duty. "Our youngsters from Piedmont and Calabria," said he to Father Tantine, in explanatory fashion, "get on well enough; but those make-believe Italians from Batignolles and Montrouge whom the governor has been recruiting lately, give me no end of trouble. He says they're cheaper, but they'll really kill me with worry. They are puffed up with pride and impertinence, and as vicious as if they were men. As for their heads, they are as hard as stone, and besides they've no taste for music, nothing musical in their natures."

Tantaine's eyes were wide open behind his spectacles. All this was new to him; and as he believed in the maxim that 'tis never too late to learn, he listened to Professor Poluche with due attention. "Your's is a difficult task," he said. "It must be very trying to teach music to children so young."

The professor raised his eyes to heaven in despair. "Would to God," he cried, "that I could teach them the divine art, its first principles, all so dear to my soul. But no; the master doesn't wish it, in fact he would dismiss me if he caught me doing anything of the kind."

"But it seems to me you were teaching when I came in."

"Let me explain myself. You have heard, I presume, of those old women who train singing birds with reed-organs and whistles, and so on."

No; Tantaine had never heard of them, and confessed his ignorance in all humility. "Ah, well," resumed the professor with a bitter smile, "I teach boys instead of birds, that's all—teach them not by rule, but by ear so to say—that is much as you teach a parrot to talk. It's a sad business, sir, for a man of any imagination. There are days when I envy the parrot teachers. Ah! what patience I need to be sure."

The gentle Tantaine smiled and pointed to the riding whip. "And this?" he asked.

Poluche shrugged his shoulders. "I should like to see you in my place for twenty-four hours," said he. "The master picks up a boy, and he brings him here. Well, what then? The child's in despair, nervous and worried and so on, and yet in a couple of weeks or three, at the most, I must teach him to play something. Perhaps he never saw a violin before; at all events he knows nothing of music. Never mind. I must teach him, mechanically, the 12 or 15 positions which the simplest tune requires. Naturally the young beggar resists, and I as naturally insist on obedience. Can you drive a nail into a board without a hammer? No. Very well, my whip's my hammer, and with its help I drive the tunes into my pupils' memory. But don't imagine for a moment, that those imps are afraid of punishment. By no means. They thrive on blows as other children thrive on caresses. They howl if they are touched—indeed as soon as ever I raise my arm, but not a real tear ever falls from their eyes. I find other modes of punishment vastly more effectual than the whip. I manage them through their stomachs. I suppress a quarter, a third, or half of their porridge, and sometimes, but not often, the whole of it. It is astonishing how swiftly fasting sharpens their faculties. If they are especially obstinate, I keep them at work at night time. There's nothing like that. In a single night an obstinate young imp will learn more than at four lessons in the daytime. The method's infallible. It was given to me by the manager of a circus who employed it successfully in teaching a horse to play the hurdy gurdy."

Tantaine, during this long explanation, had felt a cold chill creep down his back. His prejudices were not strong, but he felt that this system of education was not altogether satisfactory.

"Ah," resumed the professor. "if I could only do as I choose about the tunes."

"Eh?" asked Tantaine.

"Why, don't you understand? I have 40 pupils who start out each morning, and never come home before midnight. As soon as I have drilled them to play some tune, it becomes popular. Now lately I've been teaching

them the '*Chapeau de la Marguerite*' and, come, don't you hear it played and hummed wherever you go?"

Tantaine now understood how it happened that certain tunes were at different intervals heard through the length and breadth of Paris.

"Ah!" resumed Poluche, "Ah! if the governor would only let me, I would give the French a taste for good music. But then he has no mind for art. He won't have it. Why, he almost dismissed me one day, when I played these young beggars an air from one of my own operas."

Time was passing, but Tantaine showed no signs of weariness. "From one of your own operas?" said he.

"Yes," answered Poluche, in a different tone to that in which he had so far spoken. "There isn't a musical theatre that hasn't an opera of mine in its archives. One of my friends, who went crazy from absinthe, wrote lovely librettos for me. No, don't laugh. I received a first prize at the Conservatoire. I had illusions in those days, and wanted to become famous; I drank water and worked all night. But the day came when I grew weary of waiting for fame, and then I tried to give lessons. Alas! I was so ugly and disagreeable that no boarding school would engage me. I was literally dying of hunger when I met the governor. He tempted me, and I yielded. I have five francs a day regularly, and two sous more for each pupil. It's a disgraceful trade, no doubt, I loathe it, and myself too, but at all events, I don't starve."

He stopped short, listened for a moment, and then uneasily exclaimed, "Here comes the master! I know his step. If you wish to see him, go down and meet him. He never comes up, for he's afraid of the stairs."

XXII.

PROFESSOR POLUCHE's master might be judged at a single glance. He was plainly enough a rascal—not an ordinary one, far from it, for he combined in his appearance the air of a charlatan, a hair-dresser, a police spy, and a horse-dealer. Physically Perpignan was a short, apoplectic looking man, very stout and red, with an impudent mouth and a cynical eye. He over-dressed himself and to look at him one might have imagined that he had pillaged a jeweller's shop, and adorned himself with the spoils. When he spoke, he drew a sepulchral bass voice from the innermost depths of his stomach, where his mind was apparently situated. He looked as snobbish and as vulgar as ever, as Tantaine—now carefully descending the rickety stairs—caught sight of him in the hall below.

Poluche had felt anxious on seeing the old clerk, and Perpignan his master, looked positively frightened. However, their reasons were not the same. The ex-cook knew that Tantaine was Mascaret's right arm. "Thunder!" he said to himself. "If this old fellow has taken the trouble to come here for me, it must be for some powerful reason. I must be careful." And feigning a smile, he offered Father Tantaine his hand. "Delighted to see you!" he said aloud. "How can I serve you? For I sincerely trust you have come to ask me some service."

"Oh! the inarest trifle," answered Tantaine, returning the smile.

"So much the worse, then; for I am really very fond of Monsieur Mascaret—very fond indeed."

This friendly parley had taken place in the hall, and the shouts and the laughter of the children, devouring the contents of Mother Butor's cauldron,

could be plainly heard, coupled with repeated groans and sobs. "A thousand thunders!" shouted Perpignan in a voice which would have shaken every pane of glass in the windows, had there been any. "What's up, now—who's complaining?"

As no answer came from the kitchen, Professor Poluche deemed it right to speak. "The urohins who are blubbing there," said he, "are a couple of our Parisians whom I have put on short allowances. They shan't have a mouthful until they have learned—"

He stopped short, struck dumb by his master's threatening look. "On short allowances!" repeated Perpignan—"do you dare, under my very roof, without my knowledge, to deprive these poor children of an ounce of their food? It's infamous! simply infamous, Monsieur Poluche! What on earth do you mean by such audacity?"

"But, master," stammered the professor, "you have told me a thousand times—"

"Told you? Told you what? That you were a fool, eh? So I have, and I've always added, that you'd never be anything else. Now hold your tongue, and go and tell Mother Butor to give those cherubs their grub."

The scene was a regrettable one, irreparable in every sense, and yet, although inwardly enraged, Perpignan tried to seem calm, and taking Father Tantine by the arm drew him to the end of the passage. "I presume you came to see me on business," he said. "Very good. Well come into my office here."

He thereupon opened the door of a dirty little room, dingy and dilapidated like the rest of the house. Three chairs, a deal table, and some shelves on which lay three or four ledgers, composed the furniture. Tantine and Perpignan sat down, and for a moment looked at each other without speaking, each seeking to penetrate the other's secret thoughts. Two duellists sword in hand, awaiting the signal of their seconds, could never have been more watchful. However, so far as these preliminaries were concerned the advantage was entirely on the side of Tantine, who was so to say, entrenched behind his goggles; Perpignan, therefore, was the first to speak. "How did it happen, that you learned of my little establishment?" he asked.

"Oh! by the merest accident," answered Tantine, carelessly. "A person who goes about as much as I do naturally hears of a good many things. For instance, we know very well that you have taken every precaution to avoid being compromised."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You are, of course, the promoter, the master in reality, but apparently you are nothing at all. To the outside world a man named Butor, your cook's husband, is the manager, and the lease of the house is in his name. Now if anything disagreeable happened, you would disappear, and the police would only be able to lay their hands on Butor, your man of straw. Such tactics usually succeed, unless a man has an enemy skilful enough to render his precautions useless, by producing absolute proofs of collusion."

The ex-cook was too quick witted not to understand this threat. "These people know something," he thought: "I must find out what it is." And he added aloud, "The best way after all, is to have a clear conscience; as for myself, having nothing to conceal, I have nothing to fear. You have seen my establishment—what do you think of it?"

"It seems to me well started."

"Indeed it is. No doubt a good factory at Roubaix would have been more profitable, but then a man has to consider his means and do the best accordingly."

Tantaine nodded. "It isn't a bad trade," he said.

"No not bad—but then there's a deal of competition, which sadly diminishes the little profit you make. Why, I've plenty of competitors in the Rue Sainte-Marguerite. But I never liked the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Here my cherubs have better air."

"Certainly; and besides," added Tantaine, with an innocent look, "if they howl when they are punished, there are no neighbours to hear them."

Perpignan thought it best to take no notice of this observation. "The newspapers," he continued, "have seen fit to make an everlasting row about us. But really, they had far better confine themselves to politics. Who on earth are we injuring? No one in the world. The truth is, they exaggerate our profits, which don't amount to much."

"Nonsense! you make your living."

"Of course I'm not out of pocket; but I assure you that there is really very little to be made. For instance, just now six of my cherubs are sick in hospital, and then there is another in bed in the kitchen. These are, of course, a dead loss to me."

"You are, indeed, to be pitied!" said Tantaine, gravely.

The old man's coolness annoyed Perpignan more and more. "Zounds!" he cried, "if you and Mascarot think the speculation such a good one, why don't you try it for yourselves? You seem to think any number of children can be found, but you are mistaken, my dear sir, much mistaken. You must go to Italy, get them together, and smuggle them across the frontier as if they were contraband goods. It is simply ruinous!"

Perpignan spoke intentionally in this open confiding manner. He anticipated questions as if he wished to conquer his visitor by his seeming frankness. But Tantaine was not to be diverted from his object by a flow of words, and as Perpignan paused to draw breath, he swiftly intervened.

"And how many pupils have you?" he asked with a simple air.

"Oh, forty or fifty," answered Perpignan.

"Dear me," rejoined the old clerk, "you manage matters on a grand scale. What sum have they each to bring home every night?"

This question was so indiscreet, that Perpignan hesitated. "It depends," he answered.

"Well! you can tell the average?"

"Call it three francs, then."

Tantaine's smile was so genial, that it was impossible to suspect him of any duplicity, as he replied: "Let us call it three francs then, and say you have forty cherubs; so they bring you one hundred and twenty francs a day."

The old man's gentle obstinacy surprised Perpignan. "That is absurd!" he exclaimed. "Do you think each of my boys brings in that sum?"

"It would be absurd if you hadn't the means of compelling them to bring it."

The ex-cook started. "I really don't understand you," he said, in a somewhat anxious voice. "What do you mean?"

"Ah! no offence of course," answered Tantaine, courteously. "Only I should be telling a frightful falsehood if I said that public opinion is in your favour. Between us, the *Gazette des Tribunaux* does you a deal of harm. It has acquainted the public with some of the practices your colleagues re-

sort to in view of encouraging their lads to work. Did you hear about that master who sometimes fastened his boys on an iron bed, and left them a day, two days, and even three days, without food. What was he sentenced to?"

Perpignan, who was by this time wretchedly ill at ease, now hastily rose to his feet. "Do I know?" he cried. "What do I care for these stories? Never once have I committed a single act of cruelty."

Tantane settled his spectacles. "A man may have the kindest heart in the world, and yet be the victim of circumstances," he answered.

The decisive moment was evidently approaching as Perpignan instinctively realised: "I don't understand you," he said once more.

"Well, then, let me give you an example. Suppose you had reason to complain of one of your cherubs to-night. What would you do with him? Shut him up in the cellar, perhaps. Where would be the harm? Well, you would go to bed and sleep, with a quiet conscience, like a log. But in the night, say the rain pours down in torrents. A pile of sand or stones stops up the gutter in your street, and all the rain water flows into your cellar. In the morning, when you go to let your cherub out, you find him stiff and dead. He has been drowned."

The ex-cook's usually red face had now become absolutely livid. "And what then?" he asked.

"Ah! here it is that the annoyance begins. Naturally, it would be difficult to decide on what course to pursue. It would be a simple thing to send for the police, but then an inquiry would take place, and the attention of the public prosecutor would be called to your establishment. So after all, it's better to dispose of the body. No one knows that the child's there. A hole's dug, the body's buried, and there's an end to the matter. Come, hasn't anything of the kind ever happened?"

Perpignan had gone to the door, and was leaning against it as if to prevent the old clerk from retreating. "You know too much, Monsieur Tantane," he said, "a great deal too much!"

There was no mistake about the ex-cook's tone of voice, and besides, his attitude, in front of the door, was more significant than any explanations. However, Tantane did not seem to notice his hostile manner. Quite the contrary. He smiled benignly, as pleased with himself, apparently, as a child is after some frightful piece of mischief, the extent of which he is absolutely ignorant of, whilst its consequences he cannot calculate. "After all," said he, "it's a mere nothing. At the utmost, manslaughter by imprudence and the public prosecutor would have to be awfully clever to obtain a severer sentence than five years' imprisonment. Still, if certain antecedents were raked up—a certain journey to Nancy, for instance—"

This was too much for Perpignan, who forthwith exploded. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he cried. "Explain yourself—what do you want of me?"

"A little service, as I said before."

"Indeed! and is it for 'a little service' that you intimidate and threaten me in this way, as if you meant to blackmail me?"

"My dear sir—"

"You forget one thing, and that is, I am not easily intimidated—"

"Allow me to make an observation. Was it not you yourself who first spoke of your—well, we will call it business, if you like! I didn't mention it to you."

"Then it was merely by way of making yourself agreeable that you have been telling me all these absurd tales?"

Tantaine shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," resumed Perpignan, trying to control his voice, "shall I tell you, in my turn, what I think?"

"By all means, if it doesn't trouble you too much."

"I will tell you, then, that you have come here on an errand that no man should undertake alone. To come and say to anyone, face to face, the things that you have said to me, you ought to be younger and of a different build. It wasn't a prudent thing to do, to venture into such a house as this—"

"But—heavens and earth! what could happen to me?"

Perpignan did not answer. His face was convulsed, his eyes were blood-shot, and his lips white with rage. He was in one of those fits of passion when a man neither knows nor cares what he does. He had slipped his hand into his pocket; but Tantaine, indifferent as he seemed, had watched each movement he made, and as Perpignan was about to draw his hand out again—his eyes shining the while with fiendish hate—the old clerk started from his seat and sprang forward. The ex-cook, with his bull's neck, was of uncommon strength, but as the old fellow clutched hold of him he staggered. However, a great effort enabled him to draw himself together, and he struggled desperately, lunging out with his one free fist at hap-hazard. But it was all in vain. Tantaine had caught him by the neck-tie, had twisted it round, and was so fairly throttling him, that a rattle came from his throat. The struggle was soon over. With wonderful vigour for a man of his age and appearance, Tantaine twisted his adversary round, making him spin like a top, and then suddenly clutching hold of him again, on either side below the ribs, lifted him off the ground, and flung him on to a chair. That was all; not a cry, not a word. No one, however, would have recognised worthy Father Tantaine; he seemed transfigured, and in lieu of a benign expression, his features now wore a look of unutterable contempt and disgust. "Ah, you wanted to stab me, did you?" said he to Perpignan, who was trying to regain breath, "you wanted to kill an inoffensive old man who had never harmed you. Did you think I was simple enough to venture into your lair without any precautions?" And producing a revolver he added sternly, "Now, throw your knife down!"

Tantaine was right. It was a sharp-pointed knife that Perpignan had tried to open in his pocket, but he was now so demoralised, so cowed, that he obediently tossed the weapon into the corner without more ado.

"Good!" said Tantaine, approvingly. "I'm glad to see that you are becoming reasonable. Is it possible that a sensible man like yourself— Come, you hadn't reflected. I came here alone, to be sure, but plenty of people knew I had come. If I hadn't returned home to-night, do you suppose my master, M. Mascarot, would have been satisfied. To-morrow morning he would have felt anxious, and in forty-eight hours, at the most, you would have been under lock and key. It's lucky for you I prevented you from stabbing me; I've saved you from the police, imprisonment, and the scaffold, and now I've a fair right to insist on your doing as I bid you."

The ex-cook looked intensely mortified and humiliated. He had been beaten and laughed at; two things that to the best of his recollection had never happened to him before. "Oh! the weaker man must go to the wall," he said, sulkily.

"Exactly. But you should have realised that before."

"I was excited and angry, and you threatened me. I foresaw you meant to exact something—something—"

"You are quite mistaken," rejoined Tantaine. "In point of fact I came here to propose a magnificent stroke of business to you."

"Indeed—But why did you begin talking as you did?" asked Perpignan.

"Because," answered Tantaine, with an imperious wave of the hand, "because I wished to prove to you, to your own satisfaction, that you belong to Mascarot more entirely than your poor Italians belong to you. They are your serfs, you are his slave. You are at his mercy, my man; he holds you in his hand, and can crush you like an egg whenever he pleases. He knows all about you, and has every possible proof."

"Your Mascarot is the devil himself, I believe; nobody can resist him!" muttered the ex-cook.

"Ah! then, as this is your opinion, we can talk sensibly, at last."

Poor Perpignan straightened his collar and neck-tie, and seated himself at the table. "Come," muttered he, trying to turn the whole affair into a joke, "you've made a halter of my neck-tie, and I'm at your mercy. Do what you like with me, abuse me and insult me. I can't retaliate."

But Tantaine was not the man to take undue advantage of a victory. He had arranged his plan of action before entering the house, and as events had somewhat belied his expectations, he reflected before resuming operations. "Now," said he, "let us forget what has just happened, and begin at the beginning. For some days you have been watching a woman named Caroline Schimmel."

"Ly"

"Yes, my innocent son—you! You employed the eldest of your cherubs as a spy to follow her—a fellow of sixteen, who plays on the harp, and answers to the name of Ambrosio, which is not his own."

"It's true enough."

"That youngster's not to be trusted, let me tell you. He accepts an offer of a glass of wine too willingly; and besides the drink soon gets into his head. The other evening as we were afraid his absence might make you uneasy, we were obliged to hoist him into a cab, and send him as far as the Rue des Anglaises—a stone's throw from here."

The ex-cook clapped his hand to his forehead as if suddenly enlightened. "Then it's your people," cried he, "who have been watching this woman as well."

"Have you waked up to that conclusion?"

"I knew well enough that I was not the only one who was tracking her. But what could I do about it?"

"You can tell me, now, at all events, why you are watching her."

"Why? Because—confound it all! You know the motto on my circular, 'celerity and discretion.' You are after a secret which isn't mine, which, in fact, has been entrusted to my honour."

Tantino lifted his eyebrows. "Why do you talk of discretion," said he, "when you follow Caroline entirely on your own account, hoping to arrive, through her, at the solution of a mystery, only a very small portion of which has been confided to you."

The ex-cook was astonished, and yet, he still tried a little finessing. "Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"So sure that I can tell you, that the client, whom this mystery concerns, was brought to you by a lawyer, M. Catenac."

Perpignan was altogether defeated; his features now expressing, not

mere surprise, but absolute confusion and alarm, "Thunder and lightning!" cried he, "What a wonder that Mascaret ~~is~~ 'Pon my word he knows everything! everything!"

Tantaine had produced the desired effect, and pulled at his spectacles with evident jubilation. "No," said he. "The governor doesn't know everything, and in proof of this, I have come to ask you to tell me what took place between Catenac's client and yourself. This is the service we expect from you."

"Oh you may rely on me, dash it all! Mascaret knows what he's after, and I bet on him. Come, I'll be frank. This is the whole story: One morning, some three weeks ago, I had just got rid of a dozen clients at my place in the Rue du Four, when my woman brought me a card. I looked at it and read, 'Catenac, Advocate.' 'Don't know him,' said I, 'but let him in all the same.' He came in, and after a little conversation he asked me, if I thought I could find a person who had been lost sight of for several years. Of course I said I could. Thereupon he asked me to be at home the next morning at ten, as a person would call upon me in reference to the matter. The next day, at the hour appointed, a respectable, but somewhat impoverished-looking man made his appearance. He was about sixty—in an old frock-coat, carefully brushed, and a hat rather the worse for wear. At first sight, he looked like some old fellow of the civil service, living on a scanty pension—a case of shabby gentility in fact. However, I took a squint at his linen—bless my soul! it was as white as snow, and as fine as satin. Then I looked at his boots and saw they had plainly come from one of the best shops in Paris. As for his hands and nails, they were admirably cared for. 'Ah! ha!' I said to myself. 'You thought to catch me, did you, with this disguise, you innocent old man? But I am too smart for you, by far.' However, I politely gave him my own arm-chair, and he at once proceeded to disclose his business. 'Sir,' he said, 'I have not had a very happy life, and at one time I was so poor that I was obliged to send to a Foundling Hospital a little boy who was very dear to me—my own by a mistress whom I adored, and who is dead. This happened twenty-four years ago. Now I am old and alone. I have a moderate income and would give, willingly give, half my fortune to find this child again. Now is this possible?'"

Although he had been a cook, and was now the head of that flock of Italian boys, Perpignan was an eloquent speaker. He was highly flattered by the close attention with which Tantaine followed his words, and was by no means sorry to prove to him that in some respects he was quite equal to the redoubtable Mascaret. He, therefore, chose his words and enunciated his syllables with extreme care.

"You understand, my dear sir," he resumed, after a pause, "that this story interested me extremely. I said to myself, that all I should probably have to do would be to go to the hospital where the child had been left, and that the man must be poor indeed, if half of his fortune did not prove ample reward for a trifling expenditure of time and money. Accordingly I said I would undertake the job, and promised indeed a satisfactory result, providing I was allowed a little time. But I was rejoicing too soon, as you will see; the old fellow was sharper than I had imagined. After letting me talk on for a moment, he exclaimed. 'You didn't let me finish. When I have explained to you all the circumstances, you will probably realise that the task is not so simple as you think.' Thereupon I of course told him, that with the extraordinary resources I had at

command no one could escape me; that my emissaries were over all Europe, and that I had but to extend my hand to grasp the bird that was wanted, however securely it might be hidden—and I was really saying no more than the truth—for without boasting, my office is so organised.”—

“Keep to your story,” said Tantaine impatiently. “I know all that!”

“Very well; I will leave you to imagine all I said to my client. He listened to me with considerable satisfaction, I assure you. ‘I trust,’ said he, ‘that you are as skilful as M. Catenac affirms, and as powerful as you claim to be, for there never was a better chance for a man to demonstrate his perspicacity than you have now. As you may believe, I have done all I could; but in vain. To begin with, I went to the hospital where my child was placed. They remembered him at once, and showed me the register with the date; only, no one knew what had become of him. He had run away from the hospital when he was twelve years old, and since then had not been heard of. Every attempt made to discover him after his flight had failed; and no one could tell me whether he was living or dead.’”

“A nice little problem to solve!” interrupted Tantaine.

“It is a problem that it is impossible to solve,” answered Perpignan. “How on earth can one ferret out a boy who disappeared ten years ago, and who, if living, is now a man?”

“More difficult things than that have been accomplished,” observed Tantaine.

His tone was so decided that Perpignan looked up suspiciously. He considered if the affair had been offered to Mascarot also, and if the agent of the Rue Montorgueil had managed matters more successfully than himself. “Possible or not,” he said sulkily, “but as I don’t pretend to be as strong as your master, I felt as if the ground was being cut away from under my feet, and as if there was nothing for me to grasp at. However, I put a bold face on the matter and asked if it were possible to obtain a description of the boy. The old man answered me that he could furnish me with one, accurate in every particular, for many persons—the matron of the hospital among others—remembered him perfectly well. He could also give me some other details which would be useful.”

“And these you received, of course?”

“Not yet—”

“You are joking!”

“By no means. I don’t know whether the old boy was keen enough to read in my eyes that I hadn’t the smallest hope of success or not, but, at all events, he positively refused to tell me more at the time, declaring that he had merely called that morning to consult me. ‘An affair like this,’ he said, ‘requires most serious and careful consideration. Every step must be taken with caution and secrecy. There must be no applying to the police, and no advertising in the newspapers.’ I at once answered that my establishment was a tomb of secrets, whereupon he quietly rejoined that he took that for granted. Then, after saying that he wished me to draw up a plan of investigation to be submitted to M. Catenac, he took a 500 franc-note from his pocket-book and laid it on the table, to recomp me, he said, for my loss of time in listening to him. However, I pushed it back, though it cost me a pang to do so; but it was either too much or not enough, and I thought I should do better later on. Still he insisted, saying that he would see me again soon, and that in the meantime M. Catenac would consult with me. He then rose and went away, leaving me

less in thought about the search he had proposed than in wondering who on earth he might be ; and that was the end of it."

Tantaine was convinced that Perpignan was telling the truth. However, he noted that one essential point had been omitted. "And you took no steps to find out this old fellow's name?" he asked.

Perpignan hesitated for an instant, but deciding that it was of no use attempting to conceal anything from such a well-informed man as Mascarot's envoy he frankly replied, "My client had hardly got down the stairs, when I put on a blouse and a cap, and followed at his heels. He walked straight to the Rue de Varennes, and entered one of the most magnificent houses there, just as if it were his own home."

"And it was his own home," exclaimed Father Tantaine, "and you had just had the honour of being consulted by the Duc de Champdoce."

"You are right; the duc is one of my clients, which is no doubt flattering for me. However, may the fiend strangle me, as you almost did a little while ago, if I understand how you found out all this."

"Oh!" answered Tantaine, modestly; "It was purely by chance—fortune favoured me. But one thing I don't know, and that is what connection is there between the duc and Caroline."

The ox-cook raised his eyebrows. "Then, why did you set a spy on her?" he asked with a touch of sarcasm. My own reasons for doing so are simple enough. I immediately found out all I could about the duc, and learned that he was immensely wealthy and led a most regular life. He is married and loves his wife, so I hear. They had an only son, whom they lost a year ago, and since then they have been inconsolable. Accordingly I said to myself: 'This duc, who abandoned his child years ago, now wants to find him again, as his legitimate heir is dead!' Don't you think my conclusion correct?"

"It is logical, unquestionably. But, after all, you have given me no explanation in regard to Caroline Schimmel."

Perpignan was no match for Mascarot's keen emissary, but he was nevertheless, acute enough, to see that he was being subjected to a series of questions which had been prepared in advance. He did not rebel, merely because he dared not; besides, if he made his statement full and sincere, the greater was his chance of some tangible reward. "You may believe, Monsieur Tantaine," he resumed, "that whilst learning what I could of the duc's present situation, I also inquired into his antecedents. I also wanted to find out something about the mother of the lost child; but I am sorry to say that I didn't succeed."

"What! not with all your resources?" exclaimed Tantaine with a smile.

"Laugh at me, if you like, but out of the thirty servants in the Champdoce mansion, there isn't one who has been there for more than ten years. Now what has become of the duc's former servants? At first no one would tell me. I was annoyed and disheartened, when one day while I was in a wine shop in the Rue de Varennes, I heard mention made of a servant, who was with the duc five-and-twenty years ago, and who still received a small annuity from him. This servant was Caroline Schimmel. I found out her address, and since then I have had her followed."

"And what do you expect to make out of her?"

"Not much, I admit. And yet this annuity looks as if she had rendered some especial service to her master or mistress. Can it be that she had any knowledge of the birth of this natural child?"

"Your supposition is in the highest degree improbable," answered Tantaine, with well affected carelessness.

"However," added Perpignan, "I have never seen hide nor hair of the duc, since that one visit."

"But Catenac has sent for you?"

"Yes; three times."

"He must have given you further directions? Hasn't he even told you in what hospital the child was placed?"

"No; and on the occasion of my last visit I told him frankly that I was tired of being kept in the dark, whereupon he said that he himself was tired, too, and was sorry he had ever meddled with the matter."

This last information by no means astonished Father Tantaine. M. Catenac had plainly made that answer with Mascarot's recent threats in his mind. However, the old clerk judged it expedient to appear as if he shared Perpignan's discontent. "Don't you think it rather singular that the duc and Catenac should beat about the bush like that?" he asked.

"I'm not so surprised about Catenac. I don't fancy he knows much more than myself. The duke is probably afraid of confiding the truth to any one. There must be something serious about the mystery. For my own part I should be afraid of finding the boy, no matter how much I wanted him. He may be in prison or at the galleys by now. What else would be likely to happen to a boy, scamp enough, at twelve years' old, to run away from a place where he was well treated?"

Perpignan, the tyrannical master of forty luckless little street musicians, was qualified to judge of the misery and iniquity likely to fall to the lot of a young lad. "However," he resumed, "I had thought out a plan of investigation. With money, patience, and skill, a man can do wonders."

"I agree with you."

"Well, then, let me tell you, this was my idea: I traced, so to say, an imaginary circle round the town or city where this child was lost, and I said to myself, I will enter every house in every village, every inn, every secluded farm or cottage, and ask, 'Do any of you remember in such and such a year having sheltered, lodged, and fed a child, dressed in such and such a fashion, looking like this, and so on.' Well, at last, I should unquestionably come on some one who would answer me, 'Yes, I remember.' Now, if once I obtained a clue, if once I reached the end, or rather the beginning of the thread, I would engage to unravel the skein however entangled it might be."

This method seemed so ingenious and so practical to Tantaine, that he involuntarily exclaimed, "Good! Very good!"

The ex-cook did not dare to accept this tribute of praise as genuine. Tantaine had such a singular fashion of expressing praise and blame, that it was difficult to decide whether he was sincere or not. "You are very kind," said Perpignan. "Do you want me to believe I'm a fool? Do you really think me an idiot? At all events, I have an occasional inspiration. For instance, in reference to this boy I had a notion, which, if properly worked out, might have led to something."

"May I venture to ask what it was?"

"I presume the idea will be safe with you. Well, I said to myself, it would be almost impossible to find the lad, but on the other hand it would be comparatively easy to substitute another—a lad skilfully trained so as to answer all requirements."

This scheme was so utterly unexpected by Tantaine, that the worthy old fellow half bounded off his chair and precipitately resettled his spectacles, as he always did in emergencies, desirous, perhaps, of assuring himself that

his eyes were well screened and could not betray his thoughts. "It would have been a bold, a most audacious thing to do," said he.

Perpignan had duly noticed Father Tantaine's start, and had accepted it as an involuntary homage to his powers of imagination. Had he been more skilful, or at all events, less weighed down by a sense of his own inferiority, he would have realised that this question of substituting one child for another deeply interested Tantaine—indeed that it was connected with some weak point in the old man's armour. However, as it so happened, Perpignan divined nothing. "Ay, the idea was a bold one," he rejoined, "but I had to give it up."

"You were afraid, then?"

"Afraid! I afraid? You don't know me!"

Tantaine became more and more bland. "If you were not afraid," he asked, in honeyed tones, "why did you give it up?"

"Because there was an obstacle—sir, an insurmountable obstacle."

"I don't see it, I confess," answered Tantaine, desirous of probing all Perpignan's thoughts.

"Don't see it? Ah! of course not. I forgot to tell you something very essential. The duo stated to me most distinctly that he would be able to ascertain the identity of the boy by certain scars."

"Scars of what kind?"

"Ah! you ask me too much now, I can't tell you for I don't know."

Upon this reply Tantaine rose hastily, thus hiding his agitation from his companion. "I have a thousand apologies to make, my dear sir," he said, with the most careless air in the world. "I am in despair at having taken up so much of your valuable time. My master took it into his head that you were after the same hare as himself, but he was mistaken, and so now we leave the field clear for you." Before Perpignan could offer any rejoinder, the old fellow was in the passage, "If I were in your place," he added, "I should stick to the first plan you mentioned. You will never find the child, but you may easily bleed the due to the extent of several thousand francs, and I don't suppose they'd come in amiss. And now, once more, my apologies, and good-bye."

Was the ex-cook duped by these words? Tantaine did not trouble himself to inquire. All he was anxious about was to prevent Perpignan from guessing his thoughts, or noticing the agitation he could barely control. Hence this abrupt departure. "There are scars, are there?" muttered the old clerk, as he hurried along the Ruelle des Reculettes, "and I never know it, never suspected it, and Catenac, the traitor, never warned me."

XXIII.

B. MASCAROT explained his mode of operation in a sufficiently simple and graphic manner, when he compared himself to the manager of a puppet show, who, invisible to the audience, holds all the wires in his own hand, and moves them at will. Whenever, by will or chance, a fresh performer appeared in a play that Mascarot took an interest in, the new comer had no sooner set his feet on the stage, than the agent, to use his own expression, "hitched a wire on to him," or in other words, he placed the intruder under the discreet surveillance of one of his guardian angels. Accordingly, in less than two hours after André left Modeste at the corner of the Avenue Matignon, he had at his heels a spy, who was ordered to report each of his

acts—even the most insignificant—to Mascaret himself. This spy was no other than Beaumarchef's colleague, *Le Candide*, a trustworthy youth as Mascaret fully believed. He was told to be especially cautious, and keep himself well out of sight. But there was small need of caution, for the knowledge Sabine was out of danger so absorbed André that he paid little attention to other matters. Besides, he was more hopeful than ever in reference to the future. He had a friend now, M. de Breulh-Faverlay; a confidante, Madame de Bois d'Ardon—two allies, whose influence properly exercised might well be decisive. He had become warmly attached to De Breulh; their common anguish during the last three days had brought them very closely together, and created a friendship between them such as time alone generally cements.

"And now to work!" thought André. "I have lost too much time already."

He had dined with M. de Breulh and felt in the best possible spirits. "To-morrow," he said, as he took leave of his host, "if you should chance to look up as you pass along the Champs Elysées, you will see me on a scaffolding at work above you."

André was busy half the night in completing the designs he wished to submit to M. Gandelu, the wealthy contractor. However, he rose at an early hour, and, unveiling Sabine's portrait, wished it a cordial good-morning, and then started out, with his portfolio under his arm, to call on the happy father of that young rake, Gaston. The contractor, who had almost become celebrated since he had built that charming theatre "*Les Comédies Parisiennes*," resided in the *Chaussée d'Antin*. When André rang the bell, the servant who appeared strongly urged him to postpone his business. "I don't know what has come over monsieur," said she, "but never, never, have I seen him in such a mood, during the whole five years I have been with him. Now just listen!"

At that very moment there came a loud succession of oaths and exclamations, mingled with the crash of glass, and the dull thud of furniture thrown on the floor in an adjoining room. "Monsieur has been going on like that for an hour, at least," continued the servant; "in fact, ever since his lawyer, M. Catenac, left him. So if I were you—"

But André was in no mood to wait. "I must see him," said he. "Show me in at once."

The servant complied with evident reluctance, and opened the door of a large, superbly decorated room, in the centre of which stood the architect, gesticulating furiously with the back of a chair, which he held in his hand. Although over sixty, M. Gandelu certainly did not look more than fifty. He was a perfect Hercules—muscular and square shouldered, with hairy hands, each well nigh as large as a shoulder of mutton. He always looked hampered in his satin-lined coats, and seemed to regret the loose blouses of his earlier days. He was proud of his success and fortune, which was enormous; and he had a right to be so, since they were the outgrowth of two good things—work and economy. Even those who envied him were forced to admit that not a single five-franc piece in his pocket, back to the very first one he had earned, had a speck of mud upon it. But, proud as he was of his wealth, he never dined one with an enumeration of his belongings as parvenus usually do; on the contrary, he delighted in conversation to recall the days when he was poor and friendless. He was vulgar and brutal no doubt, as quick as gunpowder, with no education whatever; but under this coarse husk he concealed some noble sentiments. He was

generous to a fault, and his probity was above all question. He certainly swore like a pagan, his grammar was atrocious, but he had never refused to do any one a good turn, and oftentimes dispensed his bounties in the most delicate fashion. To be brief, his hands were hard and horny, but not his heart. As he perceived the door open he bawled at the top of his voice: "What fool is coming to disturb me now?"

"You gave me an appointment," began André, who saw that he had done wisely in insisting on coming in, for, on recognising him, the contractor's brow immediately cleared. "Ah! it's you, is it? All right;" and then in a softer voice he added, "take a seat, if there is a steady chair left in the room. I like you, for you have an honest face, and you look healthy and never shirk work. You needn't blush, young man, though modesty's no fault."

In vain did André seek to check the course of the contractor's praises. M. Gandelu was not to be silenced. "Yes," he insisted, "you have something in you. Any time when you want a hundred thousand francs to go into business with, they are ready for you. If I had a daughter, she should be your wife. I should simply say to you, 'Here, my boy, take her and her dowry, and I'll build you a house!'"

André did not know M. Gandelu well enough to understand whence this storm was blowing from. "I am very grateful to you for your good opinion, sir," said he; "and as for your kind offers of assistance—well, as you may know, I have had to learn to depend upon myself."

"True," said Gandelu, in a voice that was full of anguish, "you never knew your parents. You never knew all that a father—a kind father—would do for his son. You would have loved your father, I think; yes, I'm sure you would—" He paused, and then suddenly asked, "Do you happen to know my son?"

This question was the key-note to the whole scene, and André instantly realised that he was in presence of a justly irritated father, who took a bitter satisfaction in comparing his unworthy son to a young man whose intelligence and energy excited his admiration. The young painter well remembered the dinner given by Rose, and also the language which young Gaston had then used; but as it was no part of his business to be a "tell-tale," he hesitated before answering M. Gandelu's question. Would it not be better to say that he was altogether unacquainted with the young fop? No; the lie would probably prove a useless one. Accordingly he quietly answered that he had only met Monsieur Gaston on two or three occasions.

"Gaston!" cried the contractor with an oath. "Never pronounce that name again in my hearing. Do you really suppose that I, Nicolas Gandelu, ever named my son Gaston? He was named Pierre, after his grandfather the bricklayer; but this name didn't suit the young fool—it wasn't fine enough for him. He wanted a sweet little name, a distinguished name, like those of the fellows who sneer and laugh at him. Pierre is common, and smells of work and honesty; but Gaston sounds prince-like, and smells like pomade. Dear Gaston! sweet Gaston!" As he spoke these last words, imitating a woman's voice, the contractor's expression was so intensely funny that André, albeit moved by compassion, had great difficulty in repressing a smile. "But if that were all," resumed M. Gandelu, "I should shrug my shoulders and let it go. But have you seen his visiting cards? They bear the name Gaston de Gandelu, with a marquis's coronet in one of the corners. Marquis, indeed! The idea! Why, I, his father,

am no duke, nor even a count, nor a baron. You know well enough that I began life as a hod carrier."

"Young people," André ventured to say, "all have their little weaknesses."

But M. Gandelu was not the man to be soothed by such a commonplace remark. "No!" he thundered; "you can't excuse him. The fellow blushes for his father. A name that's pure and spotless isn't enough for him, he'd prefer to be some titled reprobate's son. He talks about his society—and what society it is! Dissolute women and profligate men! I know his friends—as idle and worthless as himself. They go about curled and pomaded and scented like dolls. What caricatures they are! And it's for their sake that he calls himself a nobleman! When a restaurant waiter addresses him as 'Monsieur le Marquis,' the idiot flies into raptures. He never once sees that the waiter is laughing at him in his sleeve. The fool! Why, if these associates of his flatter him and make much of him, it isn't on account of his wit or his good looks, as he conceitedly imagines—no, not at all; they simply worship his father's wealth, the gold of his father—the mason."

André's situation was becoming more and more distressing and awkward. He would have given a great deal to have been able to withdraw; for he said to himself, "These confidences are prompted by anger, and by-and-bye M. Gandelu will feel sorry he has acquainted me with his secret sufferings."

However, the contractor still rattled on. "The young fool's only twenty," he said, "and yet he's utterly used up and *blasé*. He's old, his eyes are bleared, and his hair's gone. He stoops as he drags himself about, and spends his nights in drinking. But it's my fault; I've been too indulgent; I've always allowed him to have his own way. If he had asked me for my skin to make a carpet out of, I shouldn't have refused him. As soon as he could speak, he had only to say he wanted anything to have it. I lost my poor wife, and had only him left. Do you know what I've allowed him here? Apartments fit for a prince, two servants, and four horses for his own use; in addition, 1,500 francs a month for his cigars and trifles, and he has usually wheedled me out of about as much more, and yet the scamp goes about calling me a miser. Why, he runs into debt to such an extent that he has already anticipated every sou of his poor mother's fortune."

M. Gandelu suddenly stopped short. Hitherto apoplectically crimson, he now turned ghastly pale; his lips quivered, and his eyes gleamed most ominously. The fact is, the door had opened, and who should saunter in but young Gaston—otherwise Pierre—in person, with his hat on his head and a cigar between his teeth. As usual, he was attired in the most eccentric fashion, and his features wore an expression of intense self-satisfaction.

"Good-morning, father," said he. "How are you to-day?"

But his father drew back. "Don't come near me," he answered, with a shudder.

Gaston paused, somewhat surprised, and looked at André. "Out of temper are you? Is it the gout, father, or business worry?"

Gandelu raised the chair-back, he still held, so threateningly that André darted between father and son.

"Don't be afraid," said Gandelu in a gloomy voice; "I haven't taken leave of my senses yet;" and either to reassure the young painter, or else because he distrusted himself, he threw his impromptu weapon into a corner.

Gaston had undoubtedly been startled by his father's gesture; but he

was not a coward, and did not easily lose his assurance. "Bless my heart!" he murmured. "Infanticide! I did not expect this little family fête, as Dupuis at the Varieties says, in—"

He did not finish his sentence, for André snatched hold of him by the wrist and fiercely exclaimed, "Not another word!"

But the gloomy pause that followed was not to the taste of M. Pierre Gaudelu. "Yes," he resumed, "silence and mystery! However, I should like to be informed what it all means."

M. Gaudelu's reply was addressed to the young painter, not to his son. "I will explain everything to you, M. André," said he; "you will pity me and understand me. Ah! I suppose my sufferings are the portion of a great many fathers. It is part of our destiny to build on sand and see it swallow up everything we had prepared for our children's future. Our sons, who should be our glory, become, as it were, our punishment—the punishment of our pride!"

"Not bad, not at all bad," muttered Gaston; "especially for a man who hasn't studied elocution."

Fortunately his father failed to hear this fresh piece of impertinence. He resumed as follows in a curt, hoarse voice: "That unhappy lad, M. André, is my son. I swear to you, by his mother's memory, that for twenty years he has been my one thought; for twenty years my heart and head have been full of him. I have lived for him entirely. Well, no matter. But do you know what he did last week? Why, he made a bet—he made a wager on my death, just as you might back a race horse."

"Oh! come now, that isn't true," exclaimed Gaston.

His father waved his hand contemptuously. "At least," said he, "have courage enough to own your crime. You thought I was blind, my lad, because I didn't choose to tell you, 'I can see.' And you kindly opened my eyes for me!"

"But, father—"

"Oh! don't deny it. This morning my lawyer, M. Caténac, called on me, and he had the moral courage which only true friends possess to tell me the dreadful truth. I know everything."

M. Gaudelu spoke in such a horrified tone, and seemed so overwhelmed, indeed, as if happiness was never more to be his lot on earth, that André asked himself in dread what revelation was going to follow. That it would prove terrible seemed almost certain, for even young Gaston's superb air of assurance now altogether failed him.

"I must tell you, M. André," resumed the contractor, "that last week I was seized with a terrible attack of gout, such an attack as a man seldom pulls through—gout rising to the heart; you know the case, no doubt. For three days the doctors thought it was all UP with me, and I thought so myself. I had made my will, and felt myself crumbling to bits like an old building. Well, while I was in this state my son never left me. He remained at my bedside, looking dreadfully sad, and in spite of my intense sufferings, his attentions made me feel happy. He loves me, I said, after all! He has not much sense; but, at all events, his heart is in the right place. If I died, he'd cry for me, I'm sure of it. Yes, I said all this to myself. Ah! what a simpleton I was! He was not watching over me to preserve my life. He was lying in wait for my death, which would give him entire possession of my fortune. If he looked sad, it was only because he was being harrassed by creditors. And when he left me, it was only to negotiate a loan, and to tell every one how ill I was, and that there was no

possibility of my recovery. In fact, he went to a usurer named Clergeot and applied for a loan of a hundred thousand francs, on the assurance that I had only a few hours to live. I had in my hands, not an hour ago, the paper on which the conditions were specified. They were, that if I should die within a week, my son would give twenty thousand francs commission. If I lived another month, he agreed to pay a hundred and fifty thousand francs. But if, by any unlucky chance, I recovered, Clergeot's claim should amount to two hundred thousand."

The unfortunate contractor was stifling, and, anxious for relief, he tore off his necktie and gasped for breath. Then, producing his handkerchief, he wiped away the perspiration which had gathered on his forehead. "This man will never forgive me," thought André, "for having been the involuntary confidant of so sad a story."

But the young man was mistaken. Primitive natures never suffer in silence; they require the relief of words. All that Gandelu had said to André he would have said to any man he esteemed, who might have come in at that moment.

"Before advancing such a sum as this—for a hundred thousand francs is no trifle—the usurer wished to ascertain if matters were such as my son pretended. He asked for sureties, for a medical certificate. My son found a means of satisfying this usurer. He talked to me of a physician, a specialist, who would understand my case perfectly, he said; at the same time begging me to see him. My son had never seemed so kind, so affectionate; he insisted with such tender earnestness, that at last I yielded, and one evening said to him: 'Bring me your wonderful doctor, if you really think he can cure me.' And he brought him! Yes, Monsieur André, he found a physician base enough to be made a fool of, and this physician I can expose to-day if I choose, to the contempt of the public and the indignation of his *confrères*. He came, and remained nearly an hour. I can see him now leaning over my bed, asking innumerable questions and feeling my pulse. At last he went away, leaving an insignificant prescription; he went away followed by my son. They both met Clergeot in the street, where he was waiting for them, to learn the result of this monstrous consultation. Do you know what the usurer was told? why, the doctor said to him, 'You can advance the coin, the old boy can't possibly recover. And this is why, five minutes later, my son returned happy and smiling, and joyfully exclaiming: 'It's all right, father! You will soon be out again!' I am out again, in spite of the doctor's assertion; for, strange as it may appear, I began to improve that very night, and it so happened that Clergeot had asked for forty-eight hours in which to raise the cash. Meanwhile he learned of my recovery, and thus my son lost his money."

There were tears in the poor old father's eyes as he told this dismal story. It was a sorry sight indeed. He remained silent for a few moments, and then, in a heart-broken voice, he turned to his son: "Was it courage you lacked, my boy? You could easily have hastened the death yet so earnestly desired. You didn't know, possibly, that one of my medicines was a deadly poison, and that ten drops instead of one would have freed you from me."

André was watching Gaston. He took it for granted that he would throw himself at his father's feet and implore his pardon. Not so, however, for Gaston stood impassive, pale, and with lips compressed. He seemed humiliated and irritated, but not moved or touched. In fact, he was at that moment absorbed in wondering how the story of this negotiation with

Clergeot had reached Catenac's ears, and how he had managed to procure the original agreement. The contractor had thought, with André, that his son would ask his forgiveness. But seeing that Gaston remained obstinately silent, M. Gandelu's anger poured forth again. "Do you know, my dear André," he asked, "what my son would like to do with my fortune? Why, he wants to offer it to a creature he has picked out of the gutter, a woman whom he is pleased to call a viscountess. Viscountess de Chantemille! Marquis Gaston! They are worthy of each other."

Gaston was touched now. "You sha'n't insult Zora!" he exclaimed.

His father laughed. "I sha'n't?" he repeated. "Dear me. Please understand I shall do precisely what I please with your Zora. You are not twenty-one yet, and I shall simply have your viscountess shut up in gaol."

"You won't do that!"

"Indeed I will; you are a minor, but your Zora, whose real name, by the way, is Rose, is much older. The code is precise, and I have read it."

"But, father!"

"It's of no use: my lawyer has filed a complaint, and before night your viscountess will be safe behind some stone walls."

This blow was so cruel and so unexpected that tears of resentment stood in Gaston's eyes. "Zora in prison!" he cried.

"Yes, at the Dépôt of the Préfecture to begin with, then before the Tribunal of Correctional Police, and finally at Saint-Lazare. Catenac told me the routine."

"It's shameful!" cried Gaston. "Zora in prison! Well, all right, just try it. Bring her before the tribunal, you'll see I and all my friends will be there. Yes, I'll go and sit beside her and prove she's an honest woman. I'll prove that all this is so much fiendish malice on your part. I'll say I love and esteem her, and that I mean to marry her when I'm one-and-twenty. The papers will write articles about us. Go on! I rather like it, on the whole. Great as a man's self-control may be, it isn't without its limits."

M. Gandelu had restrained himself as long as possible, and even while telling his son that he knew the horrible villainy he had been guilty of, he had, both in word and gesture, been far milder than the young reprobate deserved; but these absurd and cynical threats were more than he could endure. The blood rushed to his brain, he lost his head, and rushed towards the chair-back which he had flung aside a moment previously. But André was on the alert, and quick as thought he opened the door with one hand, and with the other pushed Gaston into the passage outside, so that when the contractor turned with his arm raised to strike he found himself alone with the young painter.

"What have you done?" he exclaimed. "Don't you see that he'll go to that creature and warn her, and she will have time to escape? I must prevent that!" and as André, fearing he knew not what, tried to restrain him, the old man, with his muscular arm, shoved the young fellow aside, and rushed out of the room, shouting to his servants.

André was overcome with horror. No doubt he was neither a Puritan nor a simpleton. Having greatly suffered, he had considerable experience of life. Young as he was he had met with a fair number of rascals. He knew some of those libertines who are the scourge of their families, some of those cracked brains whom passion toys with, but never before had he found himself thus face to face with the excesses of one of those prematurely withered young dandies, brainless and heartless, who flatter themselves

that they are the flower of modern French chivalry, although they have even more degrading vices than the lowest of the low. He had been amused by their follies as caricatured on the stage, but he had never thought of the odious side of their conduct. He had no conception of the amount of impudence and vanity, cold rascality and absolute selfishness, embodied in the person of a "*petit crevé*," a "*gommeux*." Better than any one else, probably, he could form an accurate estimate of Gaston's conduct, for at thirteen he had been thrown on the world, and had often lounged for the family ties which had been denied him. However, he had now no time for reflection, for M. Gandelu returned with a composed countenance and air of genial roughness, acquired only by a very great effort. "Let me tell you how things are now," he said, in a voice that quivered despite himself. "My son is locked into his room, and an old servant of mine, a fellow who carried his hod once upon a time, and whom he can't persuade or bribe, has mounted guard at the floor."

"But don't you fear, sir, that in his excitement and anger—"

The contractor shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! you don't know him. You would make a great mistake if you supposed he at all resembled any man you know. What do you think he is doing now? Why, lying on his bed face downwards, and howling for his Zora. Zora indeed! I ask you if that's a name for a Christian woman? What do these creatures give these boys to drink that deprives them of every manly quality? If his mother hadn't been a saint on earth I should really ask myself if he were any son of mine."

He dropped on to a chair, and laid his head on the desk in front of him.

"You are in pain, sir?" asked André.

"Yes; my heart's bleeding. However, I've been a father quite long enough, I mean to be a man now. Catenac has told me precisely what I ought to do. Ah! my son wants to get hold of my fortune to squander it! We'll see about that. The law's on my side. To-morrow I shall summon a family council, and my son will be pronounced unfit to control himself, unfit to have the free disposal of money. 'Putting him under interdiction' they call it. After that he sha'n't have a penny, and he'll see when his pockets are empty if his society will worship him and call him 'marquis.' Marquis indeed! As to the girl, that 'viscountess,' she shall pay for the rest of them! To jail with her!" He stopped short and remained for a moment pensive. Then in a sad tone, he added: "I have thoroughly weighed the consequences of my complaint to the public prosecutor: they are appalling. My son will do as he threatens—I'm sure of it. I can see him now, sitting by the side of that infamous creature, looking at her lovingly, telling her aloud that he adores her, glorying in his folly and shame before all Paris. I know that the newspaper reporters will gloat over the scene, that they will turn it into ridicule, and that it will all reflect on me, of course—that my name will be dishonoured—"

"But is there no other course?" André ventured to ask.

"No; none whatever. If all fathers had my courage, we should have no profligates. In this matter M. Catenac agrees with me. Still, it is absolutely impossible that this idea of the physician and the loan could have originated in my son's brain. He is a mere child, and some one must have advised him." The father was already seeking an excuse for his son. "However," resumed Gandelu, "I musn't dwell on this any longer, or I shall become half crazy again, as I was before. I will see your drawings another day; now let us go out." He rose, and looked around the room.

"See," said he, "the state I've put things into; such handsome furniture, too! Whenever I saw a spot on any of it, I used to rub it with my coat-tails; but when I'm in a passion, I'm like a wild beast—I must destroy something or other. Then snatching hold of André's hands, and crushing them almost in his grasp, he added: "My dear fellow! you probably saved my son's life and my own. When I rushed forward, it was with murder in my heart—all was red before my eyes—I wonder I didn't have a fit of apoplexy. I know very well that one can never repay such services, but I shall set it down to your credit. Come with me, I want to look at my house in the Champs Elysées, and we will breakfast on our way."

This house, the ornamental sculpture of which had been intrusted to André, stood at the corner of the Rue de Chaillot and the Avenue des Champs Elysées, and was still shrouded in scaffoldings. A dozen workmen, already engaged by André, were dotted here and there. They had been waiting for him ever since the morning, and were surprised at his non-arrival, as he was punctuality itself. They now greeted him right cordially, for they were all his associates. André of course responded in friendly fashion, but M. Gandelu, although he was never reserved nor haughty with his work people, seemed on this occasion to take no notice of them. He rambled through the house, pretending to inspect the work which had been accomplished since his last visit, but his mind was really elsewhere—with his son in the Chaussée d'Antin. Soon he tired of this make-believe inspection, and returning to André, exclaimed: "I'm going, I don't feel well. However, I'll see you to-morrow."

So saying, he departed, with his head bowed low, and seeming altogether so crushed, that his workmen remarked it. "He doesn't look right," one said to another. "Since his attack of gout he hasn't been the same man. He must have had a great shock, and no mistake."

XXIV.

ON reaching the house André had taken off his coat and put on his blouse, which was rolled up in his toolbox. "We must work hard," he remarked, "to make up for lost time." So saying, he applied himself to his task, with considerable energy. But he had not got fairly into harness when a young apprentice ran lightly up the scaffolding to say that a gentleman wished to see him. "And a smart gentleman he is, too," added the boy.

André was intensely annoyed at being disturbed, but when he reached the pavement and saw M. de Breulh-Faverlay, his ill-humour was at once dispelled. It was with real pleasure that he advanced to meet his new friend, who had behaved so gallantly and generously, not merely withdrawing from his claim to Sabine's hand, but becoming the most useful and devoted of allies. "Ah! this is really most kind of you," cried André. "Thanks for remembering me;" and showing his hands all white with plaster, he added. "You will excuse my appearance, I trust, but—" The words died on his lips. He had now caught a full view of De Breulh's face.

"What is it?" asked the young painter anxiously. "Is Mademoiselle de Mussidan worse?—has she had a relapse?"

M. de Breulh shook his head sadly, and his expression clearly said, "Would it were only that."

However, the only bad news André dreaded was touching Sabine's

health. If she were still improving, what could he have to fear? Nothing certainly—and so he patiently waited until it pleased his new friend to speak. “I have been here twice for you,” said De Breulh. “We must have a brief talk; it is most important you should come to a prompt decision on a matter of great interest.”

“I am entirely at your orders,” replied André considerably surprised and troubled.

“Then come with me. My carriage isn’t here, but it will not take us more than fifteen minutes to walk to my house.”

“I will follow you, sir. I only ask for a moment’s delay for time to run up four flights of stairs.”

“Have you any orders to give?”

“None, sir.”

“Why go, then?”

“To put on a more presentable garment than this blouse.”

M. de Breulh shrugged his shoulders. “Does it annoy or inconvenience you to go out in that costume?”

“By no means, I’m accustomed to it; it’s entirely on your account.”

“If that’s all, then come on as you are.”

“But, my dear sir, you will be stared at.”

“Let them stare.”

“People will say—”

“Let them say what they please!” interrupted De Breulh, and without waiting to hear another word from André, he passed his arm through his and dragged him off.

The young painter’s provisions were correct. The two friends had not gone ten paces, before a dozen persons had already turned to look at this distinguished nobleman who was walking arm in arm with a youth in a blouse and a grey felt cap. De Breulh had also foreseen this result. Men occupying such a prominent position as his own rarely do things carelessly. They are perfectly well aware that their most insignificant acts will excite comment, and are therefore in the habit of resisting their first impulses. So if De Breulh saw fit to take André’s arm in this familiar way, it was because it entered into his plan of action that the world should talk of their surprising intimacy. He knew that people would at once make inquiries about André, and he proposed to answer all curious questions in a way that would greatly benefit the young painter’s future. The baron’s conduct seemed so premeditated to André that he was profoundly puzzled, and lost himself in a labyrinth of conjectures, each one more unlikely than the others. He endeavoured to question his companion, but De Breulh answered in a tone that admitted of no second attempt in that direction: “Wait until we are indoors.”

At last they arrived, without having exchanged twenty words on their way. They entered the library, and the door having been closed, M. de Breulh did not allow his friend to endure further suspense. “This morning, about noon,” he began, “as I was crossing the Avenue de Matignon, I saw Modeste, who had been watching for you for more than an hour.”

“It wasn’t my fault—”

“Never mind! When she saw me, however, she came to me at once. She was in despair at not seeing you, and knowing our friendship, she intrusted me with a letter for you from Mademoiselle de Mussidan.”

André shivered. This letter was the bearer of evil tidings—he felt it

instantly—and these tidings he was certain that De Breulh already knew them. “Give the letter to me,” he whispered, hoarsely.

De Breulh handed it to him. “Courage! my friend, courage!” he said.

With trembling hands André broke the seal, and read:—“My friend,—I love you, and I shall never cease to love you with my whole heart and strength; but there are duties—sacred duties—which every Mussidan must fulfil. I shall fulfil those which fall to my lot, even should the doing so cost me my life. We shall never meet again, and this letter is the last you will ever receive from me. Before long you will hear of my marriage. Pity me! Great as will be your despair, it will be as nothing compared to mine. God have mercy on us! Try and forget me, André. As for myself, I have not even the right to die. One more word—oh, my only friend, the last word I shall ever speak to you—good-bye! SABINE.”

If M. de Breulh had insisted on taking André home with him before delivering this letter, it was because he had received some hint of its contents from Modeste, and feared that its perusal would provoke some violent outburst of grief. Certainly as André read on, he became absolutely livid. His eyes were wild for a moment, and he shook from head to foot, but not a sound escaped his lips.

It was in automatic fashion that he at last held out the letter to De Breulh, so that the latter might read it. The baron obeyed, more alarmed by André's calmness than he would have been by an explosion. “Don't allow yourself to be discouraged, my friend—” he began to say.

But André stopped him. “Discouraged! I discouraged? You don't know me. When I knew Sabine to be ill—dying, perhaps, and I away from her, I was indeed discouraged. But while Sabine tells me she loves me, I know no such word.” De Breulh opened his mouth to speak, but André proceeded: “What marriage is this which Mademoiselle de Mussidan announces to me as if it were her sentence to death? Her parents must have already intended to break with you when you took the initiative. Can this new match be a more brilliant one? Hardly. She certainly knew nothing of it when she confided her secret to you. What terrible thing has happened since then? My brave and noble Sabine is not one of those weak girls who are married against their will. She has said to me a hundred times: ‘If they attempt coercion, I will leave my father's house in full daylight, and never again cross its threshold;’ and she cannot have changed so quickly. No! we are the victims of some abominable intrigue.”

M. de Breulh had already indulged in these very same reflections, and though he had told André the truth, he had not told him everything. Modeste had purposely handed this letter to the baron. Warned in some measure of its contents by her young mistress, the faithful girl had pictured to herself what would most likely be André's despair, and so she had laid in wait for M. de Breulh—had told him all she knew, and then, with tears and sobs, entreated him to watch over André. “You are his friend, sir. In heaven's name watch him.” This caution had induced M. de Breulh to insist on André's going home with him.

“Of course, sir,” said the young painter, “you have noticed the strange coincidence between Sabine's illness and this despairing letter. You left her smiling and hopeful, and an hour, or less than an hour later, she falls on the floor as if struck by lightning. Horrible nervous convulsions bring her to the edge of the grave. Then as soon as she has recovered her senses, she writes this letter.” The young painter stood with his eyes fixed on vacancy, and he seemed with his outstretched arm to be following some

shadow, or some faint glimmer of light unseen by his companion. "Do you remember, sir," he continued, "that while Sabine was delicious, her father and mother watched at her bedside in turn, and would not allow even a servant in the room? Modeste told us that, as you know."

"Yes; I remember she did."

"Very well—isn't that sufficient proof that there is some secret between the count, the countess, and their daughter? A secret they guard as jealously as they would their honour?"

Dé Breulh had also said this to himself; and his suppositions had a more tangible foundation than André's. He knew the count and countess well. He knew much of their domestic life, and he knew what was said of them in society. "I have long had reason to suppose, my dear fellow," he answered, "that one of those painful secrets which are to be found, alas! in only too many households, likewise exists in the Mussidan family."

"What kind of secret?"

"Ah! I can't say; but I am convinced there's something."

André turned away and strode up and down the room. He recalled each interview he had ever had with Sabine. He reviewed each trivial word that had ever dropped from her lips in reference to her parents. He even tried to recall each syllable uttered by old Madame de Chevauché at the *hâteau de Mussidan*. He endeavoured to connect phrases and words together, and his work was much like that of a man, who tries to unite a number of broken and scattered links once more into a perfect chain. At last, after eight or ten turns he suddenly paused, and faced his host again.

"There is a mystery," he exclaimed, "a mystery which you and I will penetrate! I will leave no stone unturned until we succeed. Listen to me, and if I advance anything which is not clear to you, or any point in which you differ from me, pray call my attention to it. Now, are you convinced in your own mind that Sabine loves me?"

"Entirely so."

"Then you think that it is under imperious necessity that she writes that letter?"

"That's clear."

"You were accepted by both the count and countess as their future son-in-law?"

"Precisely."

"Now I ask if M. de Mussidan could have anywhere found a more brilliant match for his daughter—a match that would combine such advantages of person, mind and manners with such a fortune and position?"

Dé Breulh could not repress a smile.

"This is no time for modesty," said André impatiently. "Answer me."

"Very well then. I admit that, according to the judgment of society M. de Mussidan would find it difficult to refuse me."

"Then tell me why it is that neither the count or countess made any effort to retain you?"

"Wounded pride I presume, and—"

"No," interrupted André; "for Modeste says that the day your letter came, the count was about to call on you to retract his promise."

"Yes, if we can believe Modeste, that's true."

André started up, as if to give more weight to his words. "Then," he exclaimed, "this suitor who has appeared so suddenly on the scene, will marry Sabine, not only against her will, but against the will of her parents themselves! And why? Where can this man with this mysterious power come

from? His influence is too great to be of an honourable character, so if the count and countless resign themselves to this indignity, it is because they cannot help themselves. Moreover, this constraint must be of a purely moral nature, for Sabine would submit to no other, I'm sure of that. Her duty has been pointed out to her. She submits, sacrifices herself, and this man, whatever his name, is plainly a perfect scoundrel!"

All this seemed quite logical as De Breulh admitted. "Now," he asked, "what do you propose to do?"

André's eyes flashed fire. "Nothing, just yet. Sabine asks me to forget her. I shall seem to do so. Modeste has confidence enough in me to serve me and hold her peace. I can wait. The wretch who thus wrecks my life doesn't even know of my existence. On this I ground my hope and strength. I shall only reveal my existence to him on the day I crush him to the earth!"

"Take care, André!" exclaimed his friend; "take care! The least outbreak will ruin your cause for ever."

The young painter threw back his head haughtily. "There shall be no scandal, I assure you. At first I said to myself, 'As soon as I know who this man is I will go to him, insult him, and fight a duel with him; I will kill him or he, me!'"

"It would have been the height of madness, and would have rendered your marriage an impossibility."

"Perhaps; but that is not what holds me back. I don't choose that a dead body shall stand between me and Sabine. Blood on a marriage robe brings misery. Besides, to cross swords with this man, if he be what I suspect, would be doing him too much honour. No, the vengeance I shall take will be better than that. I shall never forget that he nearly killed Sabine." The young artist was silent for a moment, and then resumed: "Yes, he must be the vilest of men to have abused his power in this way. And men don't reach such a height of infamy at one leap. His life must be full of shame and dishonour. I will make it my task to tear off his cloak, and hold him up to the contempt of the world!"

"Yes, that's what ought to be done."

"And we will do it, sir, God willing. I say 'we,' because I rely on you. I repelled your generous offers in my studio—and I was right. But now, after the proofs of friendship you have given me, it is very different. I should be a proud fool if I did not ask you for advice and assistance. We two, working together for a common cause, ought to succeed. We are neither of us so wedded to luxury that we are incapable of going without sleep or food if necessary. You and I have each known two masters whose teachings are rarely forgotten—Poverty and Sorrow. We can keep our own counsel, and act." André waited, possibly expecting some objection, but as his friend did not speak he continued: "My plan is simplicity itself. As soon as we know the man's name, he is ours. He won't suspect us, and we will attach ourselves to him like his shadow. There are detectives who, for a small sum, undertake to ferret out a man's whole life. Haven't we as much penetration and judgment as they have? We two can manage this task wonderfully well, for we can operate in such totally different spheres. You high up, and I low down. You, in your world of clubs and salons, can pick up information that I could never hope to gain. You will have the social, the brilliant side of our enemy, to deal with, and I will study the other side of his life; I will trace out his past in full detail. I can talk to the servants in the hall, to the coachmen in the wine shops,

No one will suspect me ; I belong to 'the people,' and my blouse and cap are no disguise."

M. de Breulh started up in intense excitement. It was a great thing for him to find an object of such interest to occupy his empty life. This task would absorb the days he so often found endless and wearisome. "Yes," he exclaimed, "I am your's—entirely your's ! If you want money, any amount of money, remember that I am rich !"

The young painter had no time to answer, for, at that very moment, a loud knock was heard at the library door. De Breulh frowned—"Goutran, let me in quick !" cried a woman's voice.

"Why, it's Madame de Bois d'Ardon," said the baron hastily.

He at once drew back the bolt, and the viscountess, after her usual style, rushed like a whirlwind into the room, and threw herself on to a low chair. Both her cousin and André at once saw that her lovely eyes were full of tears, and that she was excessively agitated. M. de Breulh had reason to feel frightened, for the viscountess was not given to spoiling her complexion by tears, except for some excellent reason. "What's the trouble ?" he asked, kindly.

"The greatest misfortune in the world," she sobbed ; "but you may be able to help me—"

"Be sure of my willingness, Clotilde."

"Can you lend me twenty thousand francs ?"

A load was lifted from her cousin's heart. He smiled. "If that's all," he said, "dry your eyes, my fair cousin."

"But I must have them this moment—"

"Can you wait half an hour ?"

"Yes, but make haste !"

De Breulh wrote ten lines, and gave them to a lacquey, with directions to go to his banker's like the wind.

"Thanks !" cried Madame de Bois d'Ardon, "infinite thanks ! But the money isn't everything ; I want a little advice."

Supposing the viscountess would like to be alone with her cousin, André rose to retire, but she stopped him with a friendly, gracious gesture. "Remain, Monsieur André," she said ; "you are not *de trop* ; besides, I wish to speak about a person in whom you take a great interest."

"About Mademoiselle de Mussidan, perhaps ?"

"Precisely. And now I trust you will be willing to stay !"

The garrulous viscountess had never in all her life remained for five consecutive minutes in the same state of mind. She had come into the room in tears, but she had already dried and forgotten them, and seemed much amused. "Upon my word," she said, "I never heard of such an extraordinary adventure as I've just had, Goutran. You owe me visit to it. Such things never happen to any one but me, I really believe !" This is a fixed belief of Madame de Bois d'Ardon's. She is persuaded that her life is one long succession of events peculiar to herself.

"I am listening to you, my dear Clotilde," said her patient cousin.

"And your time will not be thrown away. This afternoon, I was just going up-stairs to dress—it was very late, for I had had at least twenty visitors—but at that very moment another one called, and he was so close on the heels of the footman who announced him, that I couldn't decently give instructions to say I wasn't at home. Now, who do you think this person was ? Guess !"

"I can't imagine !"

"Well, then, it was the Marquis de Croisenois."

"The brother of that Croisenois who disappeared so strangely twenty years ago?"

"Yes—exactly."

"Is he one of your friends?"

"No, indeed; I barely know him. I meet him in society occasionally; but I don't remember ever dancing with him. He bows to me in the Bois, and that's all."

"And yet he calls on you as unceremoniously as that?"

"You are spoiling all my points," exclaimed the countess, with a pretty, threatening gesture. "Yes, he comes 'unceremoniously like that.' As you may know, he's very good-looking, and always well dressed, extremely agreeable, and a witty talker. He came under the best possible auspices; for he brought a letter from an old friend of your grandmother and mine—the Marquise d'Arlange."

"Not that eccentric person who is the godmother of the young Countess de Commarin?"

"Yes, the very same. But I delight in the old lady. She swears like a trooper, to be sure; and when she tells some of her youthful adventures she is—well, not to put too fine a point upon it—she is *épatante*!"

This last word almost caused André to leap from his chair. He was very innocent. He knew no other woman belonging to the aristocracy except Sabine, and he sometimes thought they all, in some degree, resembled his most perfect model. He was not aware that ladies of fashion—those, too, who were really good and pure—tried their utmost to appear as if they belonged to the *demi monde*, seemingly fancying that they thus proved their cleverness and freedom from prejudice. He did not know that women of rank delighted to indulge in all such little bits of slang as came to their knowledge, or that they were enraptured when anyone mistook them for disreputable characters. Thus he had still a great deal to learn, as will be seen.

However, the viscountess talked on. "In the letter Monsieur de Croisenois brought me," she said, "the Marquise d'Arlange stated that he was one of her friends, and begged me to grant him, for her sake, the favour he was about to ask."

"Why didn't she come with him?"

"Because she is kept in her bed by rheumatism. Of course I told him to take a chair, and assured him that if I could serve him in any way I would do so. We began to talk on general topics, and he told me a most delightful story about M. de Clinchan and an actress at the Variétés. I was extremely amused, when all at once I heard a dispute in the hall. I rang to ascertain what it meant, when suddenly the door opened, and in came Van Klopen with a very red face."

"Van Klopen?"

"Yes, don't you know him? Van Klopen, the dressmaker. I said to myself, 'He has come here like this because he has just invented something especially *chic*, and wants to submit it to me.' But do you know what the rascal wanted?"

M. de Bréulh did not laugh, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he answered, "Perhaps it was money."

This penetration fairly astounded the viscountess, and she remained for a moment without resuming. "You are right," she at last answered gravely. "He brought me his bill into my very drawing-room, and presented it to

me before a stranger. He had forced his way in, in spite of the opposition of my servants. I had never supposed that Van Klopen, who is employed by the very best people, could have been guilty of such a piece of impudence."

"It is most extraordinary," answered her cousin indignantly.

"Well, I ordered him to leave the room, and took it for granted he would obey and apologize. But I was greatly mistaken. The fellow flew into a passion, threatened me, and declared that if I did not pay him at once, he would go to my husband."

M. de Bois d'Ardon was the most generous of men, and allowed his wife a very large sum indeed for her personal requirements, it being an understanding that she should never run into debt. M. de Breulh was aware of this, and so he asked, "Was the bill a heavy one?"

"He had brought it up to nineteen thousand and several hundred francs. Imagine my horror when I saw it. The sum was so enormous that I humbly entreated Van Klopen to be patient, and promised him to call during the day and pay him a certain sum on account. But my evident terror increased his audacity, and he seated himself in an arm-chair and declared he would remain there until I gave him the money, or until he had seen my husband."

"And what did Croisenois do all the time?" cried M. de Breulh, enraged to hear that his cousin had been treated so impudently.

"Nothing, at first; but at this last insolent threat he rose, drew out a pocket-book, and threw it in Van Klopen's face, saying at the same time, 'Pay yourself, scoundrel, and be off with you!'"

"And then the scamp went away—"

"No, indeed. 'I must give you a receipt,' he said, turning to the marquis; and he pulled writing materials out of his pocket, and scrawled at the bottom of the bill, 'Received from Monsieur de Croisenois, on account of Madame la Vicomtesse de Bois d'Ardon, the sum of, etc., etc.'"

"Oh! indeed! really so?" ejaculated M. de Breulh in the most peculiar tone. "Well, I suppose that after Van Klopen had left, M. de Croisenois no longer hesitated to ask you the favour he had come about?"

The viscountess shook her head. "No, you are mistaken. I had the greatest difficulty in making him speak; but at last he acknowledged that he was desperately in love with Mademoiselle de Mussidan; and begged me to present him to her father, and use all my influence on his behalf."

André and M. de Breulh started simultaneously to their feet, as if stung by the same viper. "It is he!" they both exclaimed.

Their movements were so abrupt and threatening that Madame de Bois d'Ardon gave vent to a shrill little cry of terrified surprise. "It is he!" she repeated, looking from one to the other. "What on earth do you mean?"

"That your Marquis de Croisenois is a wretch, who has imposed on Madame d'Arlande."

"Very possibly; but—"

"Listen, Clotilde; listen to our reasons."

And immediately, with extreme vivacity, the baron laid the entire situation before her, showed her poor Sabine's letter, and repeated André's deductions almost word for word. Clotilde must have been deeply interested, for she never once interrupted him. She gave an occasional nod of the head, but that was all. However, when De Breulh had finished, with a wise little air that was very bewitching she said, "Your reasoning is all good, except that you start wrong. Let me have the floor now. You say there's a

mysterious suitor. If he obtains Sabine's hand how will he do so? Through some mysterious power he exercises over the count and the countess—by means of threats, I suppose."

"Of course; that's clear to any one."

"To be sure; but, my dear Gontran, it is clear that this mysterious suitor must have some sort of connection with the family he threatens—utter strangers couldn't exercise compulsory power, you know. Now, M. de Croisenois has never set his foot inside the Hôtel de Mussidan—he knows Octave so little that he came to ask me to introduce him."

This remark was so specious and peremptory that De Breulh offered no objection. "You are right," he said, under his breath.

But André was not easily diverted from the scent. "I admit," said he, "that at first sight this seems to destroy our theory; but I suspect that matters are not quite as they seem to be; and the more I reflect about the extraordinary scene the viscountess has described, the more my suspicions are confirmed. Allow me to ask a few questions. Didn't Van Klopen's proceedings strike you as very odd?"

"Monstrous, sir; revolting! unheard of!"

"Are you not one of his best customers?"

"Yes; I have spent a fortune in his establishment."

André looked as if this information pleased him.

"But," exclaimed De Breulh, "it isn't so very strange after all on Van Klopen's part. Didn't he bring an action against Madame de Reversay?"

"That may be; but we have yet to learn," said André, "that he pushed his way into her salon, presented his bill before a stranger, and then sented himself and refused to budge."

"And we have yet to learn," urged the viscountess, "that she paid him seventeen thousand francs on account last month, as I did."

"Then his insulting conduct towards you, madame, is all the more inexplicable," said André; and turning towards M. de Breulh he asked, "Do you know M. de Croisenois?"

"Oh! very little. He belongs to an excellent family, I know, and his elder brother George was highly esteemed by everyone."

"Is he rich?"

"I fancy not; but some day he will come into possession of a large fortune. In the meantime, he probably has more debts than income."

"And yet he happened to have twenty thousand francs in his pocket! That's rather a large sum for a man to carry about him when he makes a call; and then, too, it's rather odd that it should happen to be precisely the sum required to pay a dressmaker's bill." André seemed to have greatly changed since he began speaking. The thought of Sabine's danger inspired him with energy and swift perception, and like a magistrate questioning a witness, he spoke imperatively, pursuing his investigation point by point. "Then, too, there's another strange thing," said he. "Madame de Bois d'Ardon has told us that Van Klopen received the pocket-book full in his face. Did he say nothing?"

"Not a word."

"He accepted the insult without a wink? He didn't even ask this stranger why he meddled in the matter?"

"I didn't think of it at the time; but it was certainly very odd—"

"One moment, if you please. Did Van Klopen open the pocket-book and count the notes before he wrote the receipt?"

Madame de Bois d'Ardon frowned, and seemed to make an urgent appeal

to her memory. "I'm not certain," she said hesitatingly. "You know that I was naturally much disturbed and troubled; but I feel almost sure that I never saw the notes in Van Klopen's hands."

André's face was radiant. "Better and better!" he exclaimed. "He was told to pay himself; but he didn't even look to see how much was in the pocket-book. He simply pocketed it, and gave a receipt. Let us also note the fact that M. de Croisenois had apparently neither card nor letter in this pocket-book; nothing, in fact, but the sum of twenty thousand francs, which was precisely what was needed."

"It doesn't seem altogether natural," murmured De Breulh.

"Wait a bit," said André, hastily. "Your bill, madame, was not twenty thousand francs precisely?"

"No," answered the viscountess. "Van Klopen ought to have returned some change, a hundred and thirty or a hundred and fifty francs—something like that."

"And he didn't?"

"No; but then he was so much excited."

"Do you think so, madame? And yet he recollected he had writing materials in his pocket, and remembered to give a receipt."

The viscountess was dumfounded. It seemed to her that a thick fog had been before her eyes, and was now clearing away.

"Then," continued André, "Van Klopen wrote the receipt, but how did he know De Croisenois's name? How did he know who he was, unless he had seen him before? And now, one more question: What has become of this receipt?"

He stopped short, for Madame de Bois d'Ardon had turned very pale, and was perceptibly trembling. "Ah!" she said, "I felt all the time that some terrible misfortune was about to overtake me. It was on this very point that I wanted to speak to you, Gontran, and ask your advice."

"Go on, Clotilde."

"Well, you see, I haven't got this bill. M. de Croisenois crushed it in his hand and threw it down on the table; but afterwards he picked it up mechanically, and put it in his pocket."

André was triumphant, now. "The game's clear," he said. "M. de Croisenois needed your influence, madame, and was determined to put a refusal out of your power. Now, even supposing you took no interest in him, wouldn't you feel you owed him, well, to use a vulgar phrase, 'a good turn,' on account of these twenty thousand francs so generously lent you by him at a moment of great necessity?"

"Yes, you are right!"

Many times in her life had the amiable viscountess risked her name, her reputation, her happiness and her husband's, for some mere fancy—or through sheer indolence. She had had many a fright, but never such a terrible one as this. "Good heavens!" she cried, "why do you alarm me in this way? It isn't generous. What do you suppose M. de Croisenois could possibly do with this receipt?"

What could he do with it? She knew only too well, and yet with that moral weakness, which is as inconceivable as it is common, she refused to look the danger in the face, or even to admit that there was any danger at all. "He will do nothing," said her cousin, "nothing, if you warmly espouse his cause; but, just hesitate for a moment, and he'll show you that you have no choice in the matter: that you must be his ally, for he holds your honour in his hands."

"And, unfortunately," added André, "a woman's reputation has always been, and always will be, at the mercy of a fool, or a knave!"

"No! no!" exclaimed the viscountess, as distressed as a child who has just been frightened by its nurse with some frightful hobgoblin tale. "You are exaggerating—you are surely deceiving yourselves."

"What?" answered her cousin, sadly. "You are well aware that in these days of extravagant toilettes, there are women of fashion, who ruin their lovers quite as adroitly as a class of creatures I don't care to speak about. To-morrow, at his club, De Croisenois may say: 'That little Bois d'Ardon costs me a mint of money!' And then, perhaps, he'll show your bill of twenty thousand francs receipted in his name. What will be the conclusion, then?"

"People will do me the honour to believe--"

"No, people will do you no honour whatever, Clotilde. Come, now, who on earth would believe it to be a loan? Folks will simply say: 'That little viscountess is a terrible coquette. The money her husband gives her isn't enough, and so she's eating up poor Croisenois.' And every man in the club will laugh knowingly. You know that, you know such things occur every day. And a little later, mind, the story will reach your husband's ears, considerably enlivened and embolished."

The poor viscountess wrung her hands in despair. "It's terrible!" she sobbed. "And do you know, Bois d'Ardon would really believe the worst. He declares that a woman like myself, who sets the fashion in the matter of toilettes, is capable of anything to maintain her pre-eminence and drive other women to despair. Yes, he has often said it." De Breulh's and André's silence told Clotilde that they agreed with her husband. "This mania for dress has been my ruin," she added. "I ought to be the happiest of women, and should be but for that. Never! no, never will I have another bill anywhere again!"

Madame de Bois d'Ardon habitually took this same heroic resolution each time a heavy invoice reached her, but the oaths of a woman of fashion and those of a drunkard are surprisingly alike, and thus the viscountess speedily relapsed into her old ways. "Now, tell me, Gontran," said she, "what I had best do? You will help me, I'm sure. Can't you ask De Croisenois for that wretched bill?"

M de Breulh hesitated. "I can, of course, but such a step would rather do you harm than good. I have no decisive proofs against him, you know. And if he's the man I believe, he will deny everything. For me to go to him, would be to show him you have divined his intentions, and would make an enemy of him for life."

"And, besides," added André, "you would put the man on his guard, and he would escape us."

The unfortunate viscountess looked from the one to the other in despair. "Am I utterly lost, then?" she cried, amid her tears; "am I to remain all my life in the power of this odious being, condemned to obey him like a slave?"

André came to the rescue. "No, madame," he answered, "reassure yourself. I shall be able ere long, I think, to reduce M. de Croisenois to such a position that, instead of ordering and threatening, he will have to obey. However, one more question. What did you say when he asked you to introduce him to the Mussidans?"

"Nothing positive, for I thought of you and Sabine."

"Then, madame, sleep in peace to-night. As long as he hopes for your

assistance, he will take care not to annoy you. So serve his interests, introduce him to M. de Mussidan, and sing his praises."

"But you, sir?"

"I, madame, aided by M. de Breulh, will toil to unmask this scoundrel. And the more secure he believes himself to be, the easier our task."

He was here interrupted by the arrival of the servant who had been sent by De Breulh to the bank. When the lacquey had left the room, his master took the notes and placed them in his cousin's hands. "Here, my dear Clotilde, is the money for De Croisenois. Take my advice and send it to him this evening with a gracious note."

"Thanks, Gontran. I will do precisely as you say."

"And don't fail to slip into your letter a word of hope in reference to the introduction. What do you say, André?"

But André was buried in thought. "I think," he answered finally, "that if a receipt could be obtained for this sum from Croisenois it would be something gained."

"Are you jesting?"

"By no means."

"But the mere request would awaken the rascal's suspicions."

"Possibly," answered the painter. "And yet—" He turned hastily towards the viscountess. "Do you happen to have a maid you can rely on, madame?" he asked.

"Yes, I have one as true as gold and as sharp as steel."

"Very well. Then give that girl the letter and the package of bank notes separately. Drill her thoroughly. When she sees De Croisenois let her pretend to be terrified at the large amount of money she has been trusted with. Tell her to make a great fuss, and to insist on having a receipt to relieve her of all responsibility."

"That sounds feasible, certainly," said De Breulh.

"And she will do it," exclaimed the viscountess, eagerly. "Josephine hasn't her equal for playing such a farce."

And at the idea of a little trickery, a smile spread over Madame de Bois d'Ardon's face. Her anxiety was gone; she felt that under the protection of these two men she need fear no danger. "Trust to me, to keep Croisenois in a good humour," she said. "In a fortnight's time I will be his confidante, and you shall know all he tells me." She clinched her pretty little fist with a threatening gesture, and resumed: "After all, it's fair enough. Why did he come near me? As for Van Klopen, what on earth I am to do without him, Heaven only knows. Where am I to turn? There isn't another man in Paris who can dress me with such *chic*!" And so saying, she rose to leave. "I'm tired out," she added; "four friends of my husband's dine with us to-day. So I must be off. Adieu, or rather, *au revoir*." Then light-hearted and smiling as usual she hurried to her carriage.

"And such are the women of nowadays," sighed M. de Breulh; "and whenever you come across one with a vestige of a heart, she's utterly without brains."

But André was too much engrossed with his fixed idea to reply to this observation. "Now," he exclaimed, "Croisenois belongs to us. We have our starting point. He holds M. de Mussidan no doubt much as he fancies he holds your cousin. We know this honourable gentleman's ways of working. He robs you of your secrets, and blackmails you afterwards. But we are ahead of him. He shall make nothing out of M. de Mussidan."

XXV.

It is by no means agreeable for a selfish bachelor to be suddenly dispossessed of a cosy home, in which he has surrounded himself with all kinds of celibatary luxuries and comforts. In fact, anything more disagreeable can scarcely be imagined; and yet this was what Dr. Hortebize had now to submit to, in consequence of Mascarot's request (presented by worthy Father Tantaine) that he would kindly give hospitality to young Paul Violaine. The amiable epicurean turned pale and shuddered at the mere thought of this intrusion. To share his rooms, or have them invaded by a *huisser* seemed to him much about the same thing. His life was to be disorganized, his habits hampered, and his liberty compromised. What could he do, where could he go, what pleasure could he allow himself, with this youth as his guest perforce, sleeping under his roof, eating at his table, following him everywhere, hanging in fact to his coat tails like a child hangs to its nurse's apron? No more delightful restaurant dinners in the society of appreciative companions—no more of those mysterious feminine visitors he received in the evening with curtains closely drawn, after all his servants had been sent to the theatre. Thus in his heart he devoutly wished that the earth would open and swallow up both the honourable Mascarot and his *protégé*.

Still the idea of evading the instructions he had received never entered his mind. Knowing the agent's designs, he realized that it was of capital importance to watch Paul during the first few days. The lad must be polished, dazzled and so transformed as to create a perfect chasm between his past and his future. And, moreover, it was indispensable that he should in some measure be prepared to hear the truth. His conscience must be hardened, so as to resist all qualms. Accordingly the doctor resigned himself to the task before him.

Paul found him a most agreeable companion, clever and witty, with an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes; a facile counsellor, moreover, preaching but a mild morality, and unscrupulous philosophy. For five days they remained together, breakfasting at the best restaurants, driving in the Bois, and dining at the doctor's club. The evenings were regularly spent at M. Martin Rigal's, the doctor playing cards with the banker, while Paul and Flavia talked apart in low voices, or indulged in music.

But nothing is eternal here below. Paul had only led this existence for five days, when Tantaine suddenly called and announced he had come to fetch him and his luggage. "I've arranged the most charming little retreat in the world for you," said he, "of course, it isn't as fine as here, but it's in keeping with your position."

"Where is it?"

Tantaine smiled knowingly. "Having an eye to the preservation of your shoe-leather," he answered, "I've secured rooms for you very near M. Martin Rigal's."

The old man was without his equal in such matters. He knew everything and everybody, and foresaw all emergencies and contingencies. Paul realized this at his first glance round his new home. It was in the Rue Montmartre, almost at the corner of the Rue Joquelet, that Tantaine had found these rooms, modest ones, such as an artist who had overcome the first difficulties of life, and saw a future opening before him, would feel

justified in occupying. The apartment, situated on the third floor, comprised a small vestibule, a dressing-room, and two chambers—one for sleeping in, the other for work, both tastefully arranged, the latter having a piano near the window. Everything was neat and clean—furniture, hangings and ornaments, but nothing was new, and Paul was struck by the fact that this apartment, rented and furnished for him only three days previously, seemed to have been long inhabited. Furniture is of course not animated, except by spirit rappers, and yet all those goods and chattels, the very rooms themselves, seemed palpitating with life. You might have sworn that the tenant had merely gone out for a lounge, and would soon be home again. The bed looked as if it were still warm, and two half burned candles added to the general impression. Beside the bed were a pair of slippers that had already been worn. The fire was not quite out, and on the mantelshelf was a cigar stump; a sheet of music paper with a few bars written down, lying on the table in the work room. Paul so fancied himself in another person's abode that he at once exclaimed:—"But sir, this apartment is inhabited already—"

"We are in your home, my dear boy."

"Then you bought everything as it stood, and the owner simply walked out."

Tantaine seemed as delighted as a school-boy who has played some practical joke. "For a whole year," said he, "you have been the sole tenant of this apartment. Don't you know your own home?"

Paul listened with his mouth wide open, as if confronting some mystery. "I don't understand you," he said, finally. "You are jesting, I presume."

"I was never more in earnest. You have lived here for more than a year. Do you want proof of what I say?" So saying, he ran to the top of the stairs without waiting for a reply, and shouted out: "Mother Bregot! Come up stairs, please." Then turning to Paul, he added: "The concierge will be here immediately."

A moment later, an elderly woman, repulsively obese, with a very red nose, and an obsequious air, belied by the expression of her eyes, twinkling under heavy grey brows, came panting and puffing into the room. "Good-morning, Mother Bregot," said Tantaine gaily. "I wanted to speak to you a moment."

"All right, sir."

Tantaine pointed to Paul. "You know this gentleman, I suppose?"

"What a question—do I know one of our tenants?"

"What's his name?"

"Paul."

"Nothing more?"

"Well sir, he's generally called Paul, and nothing else. It isn't his fault if he never knew his father or mother."

"What's his profession?"

"He's an artist. He gives lessons on the piano, composes and copies music."

"What does he make in this way?"

"You ask me too much, sir, but I should say that it ought to be three or four hundred francs a month."

"And that's enough for him?"

"Oh, yes; but then he's so economical and sensible, and well-behaved! A regular girl—at least, if I had a girl, I should like her to resemble him. He works hard, and is always neat and well dressed." She drew out her

snuff-box, took a copious pinch, and then in a tone of profound conviction, added: "He's handsome too."

Tantaine's face beamed good-naturedly. "You seem to have known M. Paul a long time, as you are so well acquainted with his affairs."

"I should think I ought to know something about him and his business, since he has lived here for nearly fifteen months, and I've attended to his rooms all the time."

"Do you know where he lived before he came here?"

"Of course I do, for I went to find out about him. He lived in the Rue Jacob, on the other side of the Seine. The people over there were sorry to have him leave, too, but he wanted to be nearer his work at the public library in the Rue Richelieu."

Tantaine lifted his finger. "That'll do, Mother Brogot," said he, "now leave me alone with this gentleman."

Paul had listened to these extraordinary questions and answers with the air of a man who is uncertain whether he is asleep or awake. Tantaine stood near the open door until the concierge was down stairs again; then he closed it carefully, and, with a hearty laugh, returned to Mascaret's *protégé*. "What do you say to that?"

It took Paul a minute or two to regain the power of speech. He struggled to collect his ideas. He remembered what Dr. Hortebize had said to him fully a dozen times within the last five days. "Don't be astonished at anything, but expect the most extraordinary events. Be prepared." Thus mindful the young fellow wonderfully retained his self-possession under this first attack. "I suppose," he said finally, "that you told this woman what to say."

Old Tantaine shrugged his shoulders in evident despair and disappointment. "Merciful heavens!" said he, with withering contempt which he took no pains to conceal. "If that's all you understand from the scene you've just witnessed we are far enough from the point we wish to reach."

This tone piqued the restless vanity of Mascaret's *protégé*. "I beg your pardon," he rejoined sulkily, "I understand that this scene is a preface to some romance."

These words delighted Tantaine's very soul. "Yes, my lad," he cried, enthusiastically, "yes; but it's also an indispensable preface. The romance will be revealed to you at the proper moment, and you will understand what success awaits you if you only play your part with skill."

"Why not tell me now?"

Tantaine shook his head. "Patience!" he said, "patience! impatient youth. Paris was not built in a day. Let yourself be guided—yield without fear to your protectors, let us strengthen you for the burden. To-day you've received your first lesson. Now think it over."

"My first lesson?"

"Call it a rehearsal, my lad, if you choose. I preferred to put what I had to tell you into another person's mouth, or rather into action, as it were, thus hoping to engrave it more deeply on your mind and memory. Everything that good woman said, must be looked upon by you as true. *It is true*. When you have so persuaded yourself you will be ready for the battle. Till then you must rest on your arms. Remember this, no one impresses another with a truth he himself doubts of. There has never been a single impostor of any celebrity who wasn't his own first dupe."

At this word "impostor," Mascaret's *protégé* started and tried to protest, but with a wave of the hand Tantaine enjoined silence. "One of my

friends," he said, "lived on terms of great intimacy with a false Louis XVII., and he related to me a quantity of the particulars of this spurious prince's life. This young fellow, who was the son of a shoemaker at Amiens, was so successful in assuming the personality of the young king, that, accidentally meeting a girl of his town, whom he had once dearly loved, he actually didn't recognise her."

"Oh! that's not possible!" interrupted Paul.

"I tell you *he didn't recognise her*. Now see what perfection *you* can attain in this line. Don't smile, the matter is serious enough, I assure you. You must, as it were, cast your own skin aside, and slip into another man's. Paul Violaine—the illegitimate son of a woman who kept a thread-and-needle shop at Poitiers—Rose's artless lover—no longer exists. He died of starvation in a garret at the Hôtel de Péron as Madame Loupias will prove when needed."

Tantaine was in earnest, as it was plain to see. He had cast aside his mask of jesting joviality, and it was in brief, decided words that he drove his ideas into his listener's torpid brain. "You must get rid of your old self as you would get rid of an old coat, which a man tosses aside and forgets. You must get rid of all recollection, and entirely so, so that if any one called out 'Eh, Violaine?' in the street, you would never dream of turning round."

Although Paul had been warned to prepare himself for this lesson, he felt his reason flicker, so to say, like a candle in a draught. "Well, who am I, then?" he stammered.

Tantaine smiled sardonically. "The concierge told you. You are Paul - Paul nothing. You were brought up at the Enfants-Trouvés, and never knew your parents. You have lived here for fifteen months, and previously you resided in the Rue Jacob. Your concierge knows no more. But you shall go with me to the Rue Jacob. The concierge there will know you, and tell you where you lived before. Perhaps, after a time, if we are diligent and watchful, we may be able to trace you back to your childhood, and even find a father for you!"

Paul looked up quickly. "But suppose I am questioned about my past life?" he asked. "That might easily happen, you know. Suppose M. Martin Rigal or Mademoiselle Flavia questioned me?"

"Ah, ha! Now I understand. Don't be concerned, however. You shall be provided with documents so explicit and precise, that if they require it you will be able to give them the history of every hour, so to speak, of the three and twenty years you have lived in this world."

"Then, I presume the person whose place I take was a musician and composer like myself."

Tantaine by this time was utterly out of patience, and he swore a mighty oath. "Are you playing the simpleton," he asked, "or are you speaking in good faith? Now have I told you that you have taken any one's place? Why do you talk in this way? No one but you has ever lived here. Didn't you hear the concierge?"

"Yes; but—"

"Heavens and earth? She told you you were an artist. You are a self-made man; and while waiting until your abilities as a composer are duly recognised, you give lessons."

"Lessons? But lessons to whom?"

Tantaine turned to a bowl on the mantelshelf, and took out three visiting cards. "Here are the names and addresses of three pupils of yours,

who will each give you a hundred francs a month for two lessons weekly. Two of them will assure you, if you doubt it, that you have been their teacher for a long time. The third, Madame Grandorge, a widow, will swear that she owes everything she knows of music, which is no little, to your lessons. To-morrow you will call on these pupils at the hour noted on their cards. You will be received as if you were an habitué of the house, and you will try to be as much at ease as if that were really the case."

"I will endeavour to obey you."

"One word more. In addition to your lessons, and so as to increase your earnings, you copy fragments of old unpublished operas for wealthy amateurs, at the National Library. On the piano lies the work you are now doing for the Marquis de Croisenois—a charming work by Valserra, '*I trediti mesi*.'"

Tantaine now took Paul's arm, and made him visit the rooms in detail.

"You see," said he, "nothing has been forgotten—any one would have supposed you had lived here a century. Like a young man who has always led a regular life, you have, of course, some little savings, which you will find in the drawer of the writing-table—eight shares in the Orleans Railway line, and a thousand francs or so in cash."

Questions innumerable surged to Paul's lips, but his companion was already on the threshold, and only delayed to say: "I will come back to-morrow with the doctor." Then wishing his pupil a sarcastically deferential good-bye, he added, as Mascaret had done: "You will be a duke yet."

The concierge, Mother Bregot, was lying in wait for Tantaine, and as soon as she saw him coming down stairs, with his head bowed as if he were in serious thought, she hastened towards him as quickly as her bulk would allow of. "How did I do it, Father Tantaine?" she asked.

"Hush!" he answered, roughly pushing her into her room, the door of which stood open. "Hush! Are you mad to talk like that out here at the risk of being overheard by the first chance comer?"

He seemed so angry that the concierge almost trembled. "I hope," she stammered, "that I pleased you by my replies."

"You did it very well, Mother Bregot, very well. You grasped the idea perfectly. I shall have a good report to make of you to M. Mascaret."

"I am glad of that! So now Bregot and I are safe."

The old man shook his head doubtfully. "Safe!" he answered. "Well, I don't know about that yet. The master has a long arm, to be sure, but you have enemies—many enemies. All the servants in the house execrate you, and they would be only too pleased—I'm sure of that—if you were to meet with trouble."

"Oh, really? I don't understand it; for we, both my husband and myself, have been very good to them all."

"You are good to them just now, no doubt, for you wish to have them on your side; but you know it was very different formerly. You were very foolish, you and your husband both. The law admits of no evasion—Article 386, paragraph 3, means a long term of solitary confinement—and your weak point is, you were seen with the bunch of keys in your hands, by the two women on the second floor."

The portly concierge turned very pale, clasped her hands and said, in entreating tones: "Speak lower, sir—I beg you—lower!"

"The great mistake you made was in not coming to consult my master earlier. There had already been considerable gossip, and the police had got an inkling of the affair."

"Yes, but if M. Mascarot pleased—"

"He does please, my good woman, and really desires to serve you. I'm quite sure he will succeed in suppressing the inquiry, or if it must proceed after all, he will at least secure several witnesses in your favour. Only, you know, he expects service for service, and he must be implicitly obeyed."

"The dear, good man! We would pass through fire and water for him, Bregot and I, while my daughter Euphémie, would do anything in the world for him."

The old man started back, for the woman, in her enthusiastic gratitude, looked as if she was about to throw herself on his neck. "The master doesn't care much about this fire and water business," said he, "he only asks you never to vary a hair's breadth in your statements about Paul. He expects absolute discretion. If you ever breathe one word of the great secret confided to you, he will give you up to justice, and then, as I told you, Article 386—"

It was evident that each allusion to this clause in the Code, which enunciates the penalties inflicted on servants who rob their employers, quite terrified the old woman. "If my head were under the axe," she declared, "I would repeat to the last gasp that M. Paul had been my lodger for over a year, that he's an artist, and all the rest of it. As to breathing one word of all you tell me, I'd sooner cut my tongue out. Now do you believe me!"

Her tone was so earnest and sincere that Tantaine recovered his usual equanimity. "Keep to your word," he said, "and on that condition I'm authorised to bid you hope. Yes, the day our young man's affairs are settled, you will receive from me a little paper, which will make you as white as snow, and enable you to tell every one you've been infamously slandered."

This was an absolute bargain, and Mother Bregot must have so understood it. "May the dear fellow succeed quickly!" she said.

"It won't be very long, I assure you. But don't forget that in the meantime you mustn't take your eyes off him for a moment—"

"Oh, depend on me, I won't forget."

"And no matter who calls, I am to know it at once—boy or woman, man or servant. Nothing is too trivial for you to report to me."

"No one can get up stairs without my seeing and hearing them."

"And if any one calls, except the master, Dr. Hortebize, and I, you must come and report it at the office immediately."

"Never fear, I'll let you know it in five minutes."

Tantaine reflected for a moment. "I wonder if this is all I had to say? Ah! I remember. Note the hours this young fellow keeps. Talk to him as little as possible, but watch him attentively, whenever you are doing his rooms, whenever he goes out or comes home." With these words Tantaine turned to leave, paying but little heed to Mother Bregot's zealous protestations. "Watch! watch!" were his last words. "Above all, don't let him make a fool of himself."

This last caution was for the time being unnecessary. Paul had no thought of doing anything whatever. Whilst he was under Tantaine's eyes he had from vanity pretended to be unmoved by the strange position in which he found himself; but as soon as he was alone, he sank into a chair in a state of absolute terror and bewilderment. When a man disguises himself, assumes a false name and costume, he usually does so for a brief

interval; he knows that he will sooner or later become himself again. But Paul was called upon to discard his personality for ever. He would perhaps become wealthy, marry Flavia, sport a title and a noble name; but wealth, wife, and dignities, would all be the outcome of a scandalous piece of deception. Never, no never, could he become "himself" again. He would be like an actor, like a masquerader, compelled to wear his mask and hired costume till the day of his death. His death indeed! He remembered with a shudder that old Tantaine had said, "Paul Violaine is dead;" and in fact it seemed as if he were bereft of something already. Had any one, before, ever been circumstanced as he was? Ay, yes, he remembered now a celebrated case, which he had read about—the case of Cognard, the bold bandit, who assumed the style and title of Comte de Saint-Hélène, and whose martial air was admired by all Paris when he figured at the royal reviews. Cognard had shaken off the past, and become a nobleman, honoured and respected. So artfully had his scheme been combined, that he had fancied himself secure from detection. But what happened? Why, he was denounced by an old companion of the ball and chain, a comrade who had known him at the *bagne* of Brest. The *bagne*—the galleys—incarceration for life! Paul must risk all this in the dangerous game he was called upon to play. Might he not be recognised by some forgotten comrade or acquaintance, who, in the moment of triumph, would scornfully point at him, and exclaim: "He a nobleman—a duke? Why, his name's Paul Violaine, and his mother kept a petty thread-and-needle shop, in the Rue des Vignes at Poitiers!"

What would he do then? Would he have the requisite courage and self-possession to turn laughingly towards his accuser, and cheerfully say: "Look at me again, my friend, and see if you are not mistaken! for I never saw you before."

Paul felt that he was incapable of such audacious impudence, and the conviction of not being equal to the task increased his fright. If he had not been already engaged and compromised, if he had known what to do, where to go and how to live, he would no doubt have taken to flight. But could he possibly venture on such a course? Albeit, inexperienced, he realised that men like Mascarot, Hortebize, and Tantaine, did not willingly confide their secrets to the winds. The revelations they had made to him conclusively showed that they considered him to be altogether in their power. Paul had a clear perception of what being in Mascarot's power signified. He felt certain that if he were to try and abscond he would never succeed in escaping the agent's vengeance. No doubt compliance with Mascarot's designs implied great risk and danger, but danger far ahead and altogether uncertain. On the other hand, refusal signified immediate peril, of a nature perfectly defined. Placed between these alternatives, Paul, not unnaturally, chose that in which the day of reckoning seemed farthest off, and conquering the last qualms of conscience, said to himself: "I accept; and now, forward to the bitter end."

It must here be acknowledged, that Paul's decision was greatly influenced by all he had seen and heard during his five days' intimacy with Dr. Hortebize. The worthy doctor was expert in rendering vice attractive, and smothering conscientious scruples. In exposing his odious theories he employed the most charming and graceful language, and if his hearer looked shocked or even surprised, he had always innumerable examples to quote. It was, therefore, almost impossible for a youth, whose principles were by no means fixed, and who hankered after luxury, and all that wealth can

give, to resist his specious arguments. Even a stronger minded fellow than Paul would have probably succumbed to the physician's incessant and insidious attacks, which, insignificant as they seemed at first sight, finished by destroying all honesty of mind, just as dripping water ends by wearing away even a mighty rock. Dr. Hortebize held that the world was divided into two classes. "And which do you mean to belong to," he asked Paul, "to Abel's posterity, or Cain's? There's no middle course. The sons of Abel are like sheep in the hands of the shearer. Cain's posterity, on the contrary, hold the scissors and clip the wool. What do you fear? The Divinity doesn't come down among the clouds, nowadays, and ask, 'What hast thou done with thy brother?' We have only to deal with human justice, which merely inquires if Abel has been sheared or done away with without transgressing the laws. Success, remember, justifies everything. A good big crime, which at one stroke makes a man wealthy, spares him the commission of an infinity of little sins which so called respectable people are guilty of. The high road to Fortune is so crowded, so blocked up, that the only fellows who reach their destination are those who contrive to take a short cut."

Such were the doctor's doctrines; and terrible to say, he could enforce them by speaking of himself and his own prosperity, in virtue of the axiom that example teaches more than precept. He seemed in fact, a living proof that justice was merely a myth. He personified triumphant vice, vice seated at a perpetual banquet, riding in a stylish carriage and splashing honest pedestrians with mud. As for retributive punishment, which always comes sooner or later, he feared it no doubt in his inner self, but he rightly refrained from troubling Paul with forebodings. He never told him that the medallion dangling from his watch chain contained a swift and subtle poison for use in the event of some sudden catastrophe occurring. No, he simply repeated again and again: "You must be brave, Paul; you must rely entirely on Mascarot, just as I have done, together with the Marquis de Croisenois, Van Klopen, and any number of others. Mascarot can do anything he pleases. He's a sure, devoted friend. Whenever there's a quagmire or a slough of despond between one of his *protégés* and fortune, he never hesitates, but like a modern St. Christopher as he is, he takes his friend on his shoulders and carries him safely across."

On this text the doctor preached endless sermons. But Paul was already a convert. Indeed, far from doubting Mascarot's power, he was rather inclined to over-rate it, so extraordinary did he consider the events which had befallen him since leaving the Hôtel du Pérou. Now, moreover, his installation in this apartment in the Rue Montmartre, appeared to him little short of a prodigy. He was thunderstruck to find that Mascarot ruled so many people, compelling them to serve him in the accomplishment of his projects. This Mother Bregot, who unhesitatingly declared she knew him—the concierge in the Rue Jacob, to whom any one who pleased might refer—the pupils who were ready to declare he had been their master for months, were each and all so many of Mascarot's slaves, compelled to do his bidding, in virtue of some secret of theirs he knew of. "Why need I fear, after all?" Paul asked himself. "Is defeat possible with all these elements of success? Do I risk anything under the protection of a man whom nothing escapes, who seems to have the wonderful power of arranging everything as he pleases, who calculates everything so carefully, leaving nothing whatever to chance? Ought I to hesitate or be over scrupulous? No, no, it would be too foolish, indeed."

However, despite what he said, Paul by no means had a good night's sleep. He woke up several times with a start, fancying that the phantom of the man he would have to personate was hovering round his bed. Still on the following morning, when it was time for him to start off and give his first lesson, he felt his courage, or rather his bounce and impudence, return to him; and he strode along the streets with head erect, and a self satisfied air, towards the address of Madame Grandorge, the widow who claimed to be the eldest of his pupils. He certainly never dreamt that two of his protectors were concealed behind a heavy dray, attentively watching him, and yet such was the case. Impelled by the same desire to know how Paul conducted himself in his new position, worthy old Tantaine and Dr. Hortebize met at the corner of the Rue Joquelet just in time to see their pupil pass, and on noticing that he was gay and smiling they exchanged a glance of triumph. "Ah! ha!" chuckled Tantaine, "our young cock crows again this morning! Last night he seemed to have lost his voice. But he's all right now."

"Yes," said the doctor, approvingly. "He's well started, and I don't think we shall have any trouble with him." However, to make sure, they concluded it would be advisable to call on Mother Bregot, who received them with abject humility. "No one has been near our young gentleman," she said, in answer to Father Tantaine's questions. "Yesterday he came down-stairs after seven, and asked me where the nearest restaurant was. I sent him to Duval's close by. He was back here when the clock struck eight. He went up to his room, and before eleven his lights were out."

"And to-day?"

"Well, to-day when I went up-stairs, at nine o'clock, he had just finished dressing. After I had arranged the rooms, he told me to get him some breakfast and make some coffee. I obeyed, and he ate with such a good appetite that I said to myself, 'So the bird's getting accustomed to his cage.'"

"And then?"

"He began to sing like a bird. He sat down at the pianoforte. Ah, the darling! his voice is as sweet as his face! I really believe any woman would make a fool of herself for him. I'm only too glad my daughter Euphémie is nowhere about here just now." And the old woman opened her snuff-box and took an enormous pinch.

"He went out after that, did he?" resumed Tantaine. "Did he say how long he should be gone?"

"Yes; time enough to give his lesson. I suppose he knew that you would be here."

"Good." And satisfied with this result of his inquiries, the worthy man turned toward Dr. Hortebize. "Perhaps you were going to the agency, sir," he said.

"Yes; I must see M. Mascarot."

"He isn't there; but if you wish to speak to him on business, you had better go up to our young friend's rooms, and wait there with me till he comes; for I fancy he'll be here this morning. And I wish to see Paul, as well."

"All right," answered the doctor. "Let's go up, then."

Tantaine's suggestion was equivalent to an order for Mother Bregot, who at once produced the key Paul had left with her. The two visitors then climbed the stairs.

Dr. Hortebize was better able than Paul to appreciate the skill which had been exercised in arranging the apartment so that it might appear to

have been long tenanted by its present occupant, and so that the latter's life might seem to be one of work and quiet. "Upon my life! old man," cried the physician, in a tone of sincere admiration, "what a scene-painter you would make—or rather, how well you would set a play on the stage." At one comprehensive glance he had taken in each detail and accessory, and he continued: "Upon my honour, the mere sight of this workroom or studio would induce any father to give his daughter to the young man who lived in it." He turned, surprised by Tantaine's silence, and then, noticing that the old clerk looked very gloomy, he anxiously asked, "What's the matter? What troubles you?"

Tantaine did not answer at first. Sitting with his legs crossed in front of the fire, he remained frantically poking it, as if, indeed, he was anxious to put it out. "I see trouble before us," he said at last in a grumbling tone.

At this declaration the doctor's face darkened. "Is Perpignan meddling?" he hastily asked. "Have you found any insurmountable difficulty in that direction?"

"No; Perpignan's a fool—an absolute, intolerable fool. However, he will do precisely what I bid him to do."

Dr. Hortobize smiled again. "Then," he murmured, with a sigh of satisfaction and relief, "I really don't see—"

"Don't see!" interrupted Tantaine severely. "I daresay you don't; but, unfortunately—or fortunately, rather—I'm not so blind. Have you 'gotten Croisenois' marriage? The obstacle lies in that direction. The whole affair had gone so smoothly—it was so well arranged—and the possibility of any misfortune seemed to have been carefully guarded against! Yesterday I would have answered with my head for success—but now!"

"Well, you were too certain, that's all; you were not prepared for the least check."

"That isn't it; but I must admit that I hadn't foreseen the impossible. There are limits to human intelligence after all, I presume."

"Please explain yourself."

"Well, this is the situation. The most skilful enemy in the world, doctor, could never have purposely blocked our road with the obstacles that chance has thrown in our way. You go a great deal into society, I know, and no doubt you can tell me if, in this year of grace, 1868, you are acquainted with an heiress of high birth and great beauty who cares nothing for luxury, who hasn't a spark of vanity in her nature, but who, on the contrary, is capable of really and truly loving. Come, doctor, have you ever come across such a girl?"

The doctor answered with a smile that implied negation.

"Nevertheless," continued Tantaine, "such an heiress exists, and her name is Sabine de Mussidan. She loves—whom do think? A painter, an artist, a man who has crossed my path three times already, and who, I'll swear to it, possesses an immense amount of energy and perseverance."

"Pshaw! no doubt he's some artist without fortune, position, or friends."

"He's not without friends, unfortunately," answered worthy Tantaine. "At least, he has one friend, and what a friend, too! Why, none other than the man who was to have married Mademoiselle Sabine—M. de Breulh-Faverlay!" This news was so strange and so utterly unexpected, that Hortobize stood aghast and silent. "How they came together is quite beyond my knowledge," continued Tantaine. "It must have been by some stroke of genius on Mademoiselle Sabine's part; however, the fact

is there—that they are friends. And, singularly enough, the very woman I selected to further De Croisenois' interests has been chosen by them to push theirs."

"Impossible!"

"That was my opinion also. But none the less, the three were closeted together yesterday evening, and I believe they swore to prevent the marquis from succeeding."

The doctor bounded from his chair. "What do you mean!" he asked, feverishly. "Do you think they have already discovered De Croisenois' plans? How can they have done that?"

Father Tantine looked discouraged. "Ah!" said he, "that's the question. A general, you know, can't be in every point of the battle-field at the same time, and among his lieutenants, a certain percentage of fools or traitors is always to be found. Now, I had planned with Van Klopen and Croisenois a little comedy which was to have placed the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon at our disposal. Everything had been foreseen, combined, and arranged. I had preconcerted each detail with the minutest possible care, and felt absolutely sure of success. Unfortunately, however, after an excellent rehearsal, the real performance was simply disgusting. Neither Van Klopen nor Croisenois took the trouble to play their parts properly. I had prepared for them a little *chef d'œuvre* of finessing, insisting on the various needful transitions of tone and manner; but what did they make of it? Why, a brutal, riotous, ridiculous farce. They thought, the fools, that a woman could be easily deceived. They neglected a number of highly essential particulars; and, to make the mess perfect, the marquis, whom I had told to be most reserved, immediately unmasked his batteries. Yes, the simpleton actually talked to Madame de Bois d'Ardon about Sabine! That lost us the game altogether. The viscountess, momentarily deceived, began to reflect, realised that Van Klopen and Croisenois had been playing into each other's hands, scented something wrong, and rushed off to ask M. de Brouh for help!"

The doctor was in consternation. "Who on earth told you all this?" he gasped.

"No one—I guessed it. Not so difficult a matter, either; given the results, it is easy to go back to the causes. Yes, that is just what took place, I'm sure of it!"

Tantine was not the man to waste time in useless words. Whenever he opened his mouth he had always something of importance to say, and his words, when apparently of the simplest kind, always had a serious meaning. Knowing this, the doctor had become more and more anxious as his companion's explanation proceeded. "Why do you tell me all this?" he asked impatiently. "Why don't you say at once, and in just as many words, that the whole thing is knocked on the head?"

"Because I don't think it is."

"Then what do you think?"

"I think it's seriously compromised, and that's a very different matter. When you play *écarté*, and your adversary has scored four points and you only one, do you throw down your cards and give up the game? By no means; you cling to them, on the contrary, and try to retrieve your position in the last deal."

The old clerk's impassive calmness now fairly exasperated worthy Dr. Hortehize. "But this is sheer folly," said he. "It's like suicide, like throwing oneself out of window."

Tantaine whistled sarcastically. "Then, may I ask," he said, "what would be the best course for us to pursue in your excellency's opinion?"

"I say unequivocally, give it all up. Abandon the whole scheme and plan another one which, if less lucrative, perhaps will also be less perilous. You expected to win the game; you had every reason, in fact, to think so. But now pocket your vanity, and make up your mind to lose it. You tried to crunch something that has proved too hard. Drop it, then; for if you persevere you'll break every tooth in your head. We've tried these people and found them too much for us, so let them be. After all, what does it really matter to us whether Mademoiselle de Mussidan marries De Croisenois or De Brenh, or any one else? The speculation isn't there, fortunately. The productive idea—the idea of an enterprise to which everyone of our people must subscribe—still remains intact. We will work it up at once. But, at the same time, let us frankly confess our defeat on this present point, beat a retreat, and bury our dead." He stopped short, disconcerted by the expression he noticed on Tantaine's face. "It seems to me," continued the doctor in a wounded tone, "that my idea is not as ridiculous as you consider it. It strikes me as altogether reasonable."

"Perhaps so—but is it practicable?"

"I see no reason why it shouldn't be."

"Indeed! Then in your fright you look at the position through singular spectacles. We are too far advanced, my dear doctor, to be altogether our own masters. We must go on. The necessity for doing so is imperious. To retreat now would be simply to invite our enemies to pursue us. We are bound to fight anyhow, and battle for battle let us rather choose our own ground and attack. With equal forces the aggressor has eight chances out of ten in his favour; that's been proved."

"Words, mere words!" ejaculated Hortebize.

"Words, indeed! Were our revelations to Croisenois mere words?"

This argument struck home, for the doctor started and exclaimed: "But you don't mean you think he'd betray us?"

"Why not, if it were his interest to do so? Reflect a moment. Croisenois is at the end of his resources; we have dazzled him with the prospect of a princely fortune. Do you think he'd quietly submit if we said to him: 'We beg your pardon, we made a mistake. There's really nothing to be done. You are poor; remain so. We don't propose to help you?'"

"But it isn't necessary to say that. We could help him."

"And what would that lead us to? Do you wish to pay his debts, and his mortgages, defray all his expenses, and gratify all his extravagant tastes? Do you think he would limit his demands? Why, now that he has been let into our secrets, he holds us as much as we hold him. You will find that he has grasped our theories, and can levy blackmail as well as ourselves."

"Ah, already the other day," rejoined Dr. Hortebize moodily, "I thought it very imprudent on your part to tell him everything you did!"

"No; it was necessary to confide in some one. Besides, the Mussidan affair and the Champdoce affair are linked together. I conceived both schemes simultaneously, and they shall both of them succeed or fail."

"Then you persist?"

"Certainly; more than ever."

For some minutes the doctor had been rattling his medallion in an affected manner, which had certainly caught his companion's attention. Now, with a weary smile, he exclaimed, "I swore long ago that our lives

should be bound together, that we should both succeed or come to grief, and, I've no intention of retracting my words. March on, since you are so minded, and however perilous the road you so obstinately choose may seem to me, I'll follow you to the end of it—to the bitter end. I've something here which will, in some measure attenuate the catastrophe, when it comes—at least as regards myself. A contraction of the throat as when a man swallows a bitter pill, one quick convulsion, a little vertigo, a hiccup, and all will be over."

This uncomfortable precaution of the doctor's was peculiarly offensive to Tantaine at all junctures, and especially so at the present moment. "There, that'll do," he exclaimed, impatiently. "If the worst comes to the worst, and things turn out badly, use your medallion, if you choose; but, in the meantime, for heaven's sake, leave it in peace, and don't rattle it in that distracting way!" He rose from his chair with a look of annoyance, and stationing himself with his back to the fire resumed: "With men of our stamp a danger once known is a danger no longer. We are threatened and will defend ourselves. Woe to the man or woman who stands in my way! For I shall hesitate at nothing." He suddenly checked himself, opened each door in succession to satisfy himself that no one else was in the apartment, and then returning to the fire-place, proceeded in a low, hoarse voice: "Come, now, after all, there's but one sole obstacle in our path—one man only—that painter called André. If he were suppressed, our machinery would work perfectly well again."

Hortebize started as if he had been touched with a red-hot iron. "Do you mean to say—" he exclaimed.

Tantaine laughed; but his laugh was terrible to hear. "And why not? Isn't it better to kill the fellow than be killed by him?"

Dr. Hortebize was so utterly horrified that his teeth chattered. He did not object to say to people, "Your purse or your honour," but "Your purse or your life," was more than he was prepared for. "And if we were detected?" he gasped.

"Detected! that's nonsense. Suppose the crime committed. Justice would at once try to discover who had profited by it. Should we be thought of? Certainly not. It would be apparent that André's death would revive the chances of M. de Breulh for Sabine's hand—enable him, perhaps, to marry her, to marry the woman he worships, and whose heart André had stolen. Jealousy would explain everything. Do you understand me, doctor?"

"What! M. de Breulh would be charged? Horrible!" gasped Hortebize.

"Yes; I know that it's horrible, and I haven't the least desire in the world to go to this extremity. I only speak of it as a remote possibility which we may yet be driven to. Violence is always repugnant to me quite as much so as to yourself, and I hope that it won't be necessary—"

He stopped short, for at that moment the door opened and Paul came in, holding a letter in his hand. The young man seemed in the best of spirits, and shook hands with Dr. Hortebize and Tantaine most cordially. "I relied on this visit, gentlemen," he said, with the easiest air in the world, "but I didn't expect you quite so early, and I am truly thankful I took it into my head to come just now."

Tantaine smiled sarcastically, as he contrasted this gay indifference with Paul's condition the night before.

"Things are evidently going well with you," said the doctor.

"They are going so well, that I assure you I can find no possible reason for complaint."

"Have you given your lesson?"

"Yes, I have just left Madame Grandorge. What a charming woman she is. She treated me with the greatest possible kindness." If Paul had been utterly ignorant why Madame Grandorge received him, he would hardly have expressed himself otherwise.

"That being the case," rejoined the doctor, with a tinge of persiflage in his voice that Paul did not catch, "I can understand your satisfaction."

"Oh!" answered Paul, "I'm not so vain as you imagine. If I'm in such spirits it's for a more serious reason."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what that might be?"

Paul assumed the grave and mysterious expression a youth generally affects when the love affair, which at that moment absorbs him, is touched upon. "I am not sure I have a right to tell you," he said.

"Upon my word! An adventure already!"

Paul smiled with consummate self-conceit.

"Keep your secret, my boy," said Tantine.

This of course was just the thing to loosen the youth's tongue, as the astute old man had foreseen. "Oh! sir," Paul protested, "do you think it possible for me to keep a secret from you?" Then triumphantly waving the open letter he held in his hand; and watching the effect of his words, he continued: "The concierge gave me this letter when I came in. She said it was brought by a banker's boy. Can you guess where it comes from? Why from Mademoiselle Flavia Rigal, and it leaves me no doubt of her sentiments towards me."

"Is that really so?"

"Yes, it's just like that. Whenever I choose, Mademoiselle Flavia will become Madame Paul."

A flush came to old Tantine's wrinkled cheeks, but faded away almost instantly. "And you are happy?" he asked, with a preceptible tremor in his voice, "very happy?"

The young fellow threw back his coat, and adjusting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, carelessly replied: "Yes, of course I am. Oh! I didn't have much trouble, I assure you. Why, I had only been to M. Rigal's three times when Mademoiselle Flavia owned to me that she didn't dislike me."

As if Tantine did not consider his spectacles sufficient to hide his feelings, he now carried his hands to his face.

"However," resumed Paul, "the last evening I saw Mademoiselle Flavia, she was dreadfully reserved and cold. Perhaps you think I tried to soften her—not at all. I said to myself, 'Let her be, my boy,' and came away much earlier than usual." The young fellow was not telling the truth. He had, in fact, felt frightfully uneasy. "And I did wisely, as the result has proved," he continued: "Poor girl! her coldness hurt herself. Just listen to what she writes." He tossed back his hair, assumed what he thought an imposing attitude, and then read the following letter aloud: "My friend—I was very naughty, and I repent. I could not sleep all night, for I was haunted by the grief I saw in your eyes when you left. Paul, it was a test—will you forgive me? I suffered much more than you could have done. Some one who loves me, alas! perhaps more than you do, has told me, over and over again, that when a young girl shows her whole heart to the man she loves, she risks her happiness. Is this true? I hope not, Paul; for never—no, never can I learn to feign; and in proof of this I am now going to tell you all. My father is the best and kindest of men, and

always does as I ask him; so I am certain that if your friend—our dear Dr. Hortebize—came from you as the bearer of a certain request, it would not be refused. I am sure, too, that were I to join my prayers to his, the answer would be, Yes.”

“And this letter didn’t touch you?” asked Tantaine.

“Of course it did! Why, hasn’t she a dowry of a million?”

At these words Tantaine started up with so threatening a gesture that Paul recoiled wonderstruck by this unexpected display of anger.

But at a warning glance from Hortebize, the old man restrained himself.

“If one only knew when he meant what he said,” he muttered. “His very vices are feigned.”

“Isn’t he our pupil?” asked the doctor, with a smile.

Tantaine, meanwhile, approached Paul, and laying his hand somewhat roughly on his head exclaimed, “No, you will never know how much you owe to Mademoiselle Flavia, my boy.”

This scene impressed Paul the more strongly as he could in no degree grasp its meaning. These two men had done their very best to pervert him. They had laboured to achieve that result with all the power of their intellects, and yet now that he tried to put their lessons into practice, *thus* hoping to win their praise, they both looked at him with absolute contempt. However, before he had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to ask a question, Tantaine had mastered his emotion. “My dear boy,” he said, “I’m satisfied. I came to see you fearing you might be wavering.”

“And yet, sir—”

“But let me tell you,” interrupted Tantaine, “I find you strong and steady, much more so than I supposed possible.”

“Yes, he has really made astonishing progress,” added the doctor, approvingly.

“So much progress that it’s time to treat him like one of ourselves. To-night, my dear Paul, M. Mascarot will have obtained from Caroline Schimmel the solution of the enigma that has been puzzling him. Call at the agency, at two o’clock to-morrow afternoon, and you shall be told everything.”

Paul wished to ask two or three questions then and there, but Tantaine did not give him time. He interrupted him with a curt, imperative good-morning, and hurried off, dragging the doctor with him, looking like a man who wished to avoid a perilous or troublesome explanation. “Let us go,” he whispered. “Had I stopped, in another moment I should have knocked the miserable conceited fool flat upon the floor. Oh! Flavia! Flavia! your folly of to-day will cost you tears of blood!”

The two associates were at the foot of the staircase before their *protégé* had recovered from his amazement. He still stood with parted lips, in the centre of his workroom—an excellent model for a statue of surprise and confusion. All the pride and vanity which had swelled his heart only a few minutes before had gone—evaporated, like the gas of a balloon that is pricked with a pin. “I wonder,” he muttered, “what that dastardly doctor and that odious old clerk are saying about me now. They are probably laughing at my simplicity and ridiculing my pretensions!” This thought exasperated him to such a degree that he ground his teeth in rage; but he was mistaken, for neither the doctor nor Tantaine mentioned Paul’s name after leaving the house.

As they walked up the Rue Montmartre they were absorbed in thinking how they might most conveniently “suppress” that young painter André,

or at least render him powerless to thwart their designs. "As yet," said Tantaine meditatively, "my information is far too vague for me to decide on the best course of action. My present tactics are to show no sign of life, and I have given directions to that effect to Croisenois; but I have hooked one of our agents on to each of our adversaries. André, De Breulh, and the viscountess will be unable to take a step without my knowledge. I have an ear at their doors, and an eye at their key-holes, even when they believe themselves most secure. I shall soon see their game clearly and then— But in the meantime trust to me and don't allow all this to worry you!"

They had now reached the boulevard, and Tantaine stopped and drew out his huge silver watch. "Four o'clock," he cried, "how time flies! I must leave you, for I haven't a moment to lose. It's no time to sleep when one has milk on the fire. I have to go in ten different directions, and see if our 'observers' have anything to report."

"Shall I see you to-night?"

"It's scarcely likely, for I think I shall dine at one of the restaurants on the outer boulevards."

The doctor stared.

"Not for pleasure, as you may imagine, but I have a rendezvous at the *Grand Turc* with that scamp, Toto-Chupin. I must find Caroline, for I am convinced I can ascertain the Champdoce secret through her. No doubt she's discreet and cunning, and has been threatened with awful consequences, if she ever divulges the truth. But then she's partial to a glass, to a great many glasses, and I fancy I shall find out what's the best liquor to loosen her tongue. And now I'm off. I'll see you to-morrow at any rate."

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THE SLAVES OF PARIS.

XXVI.

YES, he was in a hurry, this dear, good Tantine, in such a hurry indeed, that although he was usually almost as perpetual a pedestrian as the Wandering Jew, he now hailed a cab, engaged it by the hour, and promised the driver five francs gratuity providing he drove fast. The first direction he gave was in the Rue de Douai, at the corner of the Rue Blanche, where he alighted, and bidding the cabby wait for him, walked towards the house where young Gaston de Candelu had rented such a sumptuous apartment for Rose. Father Tantine seemed to know the whereabouts of the place, for he asked no questions of the concierge, but went straight upstairs and rang at the door of the "Viscountess de Chantemille's" abode. It was some time before his ring elicited any reply, but at last the door was opened by a stout girl, with a red face, whose cap was all askew. This was Marie, Zora's cook, the girl who on a previous occasion had acquainted Mascarot with everything that transpired at Madame de Chantemille's house-warming. On recognizing the old clerk, she received him right cordially. "What, is it you, Father Tantine?" she cried. "You're as welcome as flowers in May."

"Hush! hush!" said he with an anxious air.

"Eh? why hush?"

"Your mistress might hear you."

The girl burst out laughing. "No fear of that," she answered; "madame's in a certain place it isn't so easy to escape from. The more precious the jewel, the more carefully you lock it up."

This remark, which implied that Rose had been arrested, seemed to astonish the old man prodigiously. "Impossible!" he cried.

"It is so, though. But come in and we'll tell you the whole story, while you drink a glass with us!"

In the dining-room, whither Tantine was now conducted, six guests, seated round a table covered with bottles, were finishing a meal begun several hours previously. Four of them were women whom Tantine recognised as clients of the agency, the two others being men of highly questionable appearance. "We are amusing ourselves as you see," said the cook, after pouring out a glass of wine for Tantine. "Ah! what a funny affair it was yesterday! I had just started my dinner, when two military looking men called and asked to see madame. They were shown in, and at once said they had come to take her to prison. When she heard this she

shrieked so loud that you might have heard her as far as the Rue Fontaine. She wouldn't budge an inch, but clung to the furniture. So they caught hold of her, one by the heels and the other by the head, carried her down-stairs, and bundled her into a vehicle waiting at the door! That's the fourth mistress of mine I've seen carried off like that—But, Father Tantaine, come, you're not drinking anything!"

Tantaine by this time, however, had discovered all he wished to know, and so he retired from the festivity, which seemed likely to terminate only with the last bottle in the cellar.

"All goes well here," he muttered to himself, as he entered the cab again. "Now for the next!"

They drove to the Champs Elysées, and Tantaine bade the driver stop not far from the house the elder Grandelu was building. Here he accosted an alert little fellow who was driving back the foot passengers with a lath, bidding them beware of the debris that was constantly falling from the scaffolding above. "Anything new, La Candèle?" asked the old clerk.

"No, Monsieur Tantaine, nothing; but please tell the master that I am keeping my eyes open."

The old clerk then hurried on his way, interviewing in quick succession one of De Breulh's footmen, and a woman in the employment of Madame de Bous d'Aidon. Then dismissing his cab, he started on foot for the establishment of Father Canon, in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, where he found Florestan, who, humble enough in the presence of Muscarot, was haughty and supercilious to a degree with poor Tantaine. To air his superiority he insisted on entertaining the old clerk at dinner, but he could tell him nothing new, except that Mademoiselle Sabine was frightfully sad.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Tantaine got rid of Florestan, and jumping into a fresh cab, ordered the Jehu to drive to the "Grand Turc," that famous establishment, the object of Toto-Chupin's convivial aspirations. It is in the Rue des Poissonniers at Montmartre that the sign of the "Grand Turc" swings to the wind, inviting passers-by to walk inside and enjoy themselves. The pleasures provided are of an edible, potable, and saltatory nature. After a good *table d'hôte* at six p.m., one may indulge in coffee, beer, or other beverages, and then comes a dance by way of aiding digestion. There are two entrances, one conducting straight to the ball-room, and the other to the *table d'hôte*, which is extensively patronized by clerks, artists starting in life, and old bachelors living on their incomes. The repast is barely over before dishes and plates and glasses and tablecloths disappear, the restaurant becomes a *café*, beer flows freely on all sides, and in lieu of the clatter of knives and forks one may hear the rattle of dominos. Then all of a sudden a pair of large folding doors are thrown open and harmony pervades the entire establishment. The orchestra in the neighbouring ball-room has struck up the first waltz. One peculiarity of this ball-room is, that quadrilles are never danced there. The programme is a long succession of polkas, mazurkas, and waltzes—the latter being predominant. The rotunda forming the centre of the hall is edged round with benches dispersed in circular fashion. The dome above, on which a number of amorous doves are depicted disporting themselves in an azure sky, would be none the worse for a little cleaning, but the floor is kept marvellously shiny and smooth. Germany is always largely to the fore in the dancing hall of the "Grand Turc," and the gallant cavalier who

wishes a partner for the mazy waltz, must at least be acquainted with the pleasing dialect of Strasbourg. Here, indeed, behold Alsatian maids and cooks, turning for hours round and round, stiffly erect, with lips just parted, and eyes half closed, displaying, in fact, the same automatic grace as the little wooden figures one sometimes sees on barrel organs.

When worthy Father Tantaïne entered the ball-room, having duly paid his fee, the master of the ceremonies had just called "take your places for the waltz," for the tenth time that evening. The scene was animated, and the atmosphere impregnated with strange emanations and perfumes. Many a new comer would have felt suffocated, but the old clerk, like Alcibiades, was always at his ease no matter where his profession called him. He had never before set foot inside the "Grand Turo," and yet you would have sworn he was an *habitué*, so thoroughly at home did he look as he roamed among the tables reserved for refreshments, both on the ground floor and on a circular gallery overhead. But in vain did he wipe his spectacles, dimmed by the vapour and dust of the ball-room—he could see nothing of either Toto-Chupin or Caroline Schimmel, the cook. "I have I come on a useless errand?" he grumbled, "or am I simply too early?" Finding a vacant table near the counter of the lady-cashier, he sat himself down, ordered some beer, and so as to while away the time, began to study a huge symbolical picture on the wall before him. This brightly coloured transcendent work of art, if such it may be called, represented a black bearded and exceedingly portly man, wearing a white turban and a blue robe, seated in a red chair near a green curtain, having a mauve border, with his feet on a yellow carpet.

With one hand he was apparently rubbing his stomach, but with the other he held out a glass so that it might be filled with tippie. Plainly enough, he was the "Grand Turo" in person, for on one side of him figured an enormous pipe, and on the other a crouching lion, whilst there was also a sultana who most graciously filled his glass with foaming beer. This sultana, a most bewitching fair-haired woman of massive build, had evidently been born in Alsace; the painter thus paying a delicate and merited compliment to the ladies who mainly frequented the establishment. Tantaïne was looking at this work of art with considerable wonder, when all at once he heard a high-keyed voice behind him. "That's certainly Toto-Chupin," he said; "the young scamp! Where on earth can he have got to—for me not to have seen him?"

He turned round, and two tables off, in a dark corner, he perceived the object of his quest. It was not, after all, so surprising that he had passed Toto without recognising him, for the young rascal was transformed. He had planned out a new life for himself on the day he extorted a hundred francs from Tantaïne, resolving to madden all his friends with envy. He had apparently succeeded, for he was now gorgeous to behold. He had laughed at young Gaston de Gandelu and called him a monkey, but he now imitated him even to exaggeration, so that of the two, Toto himself now looked the more genuine ape. His light coloured jacket was wonderfully short and tight, his waistcoat was of a most surprising pattern, and his trousers had such little width, that it was a wonder he had ever been able to get into them. Formerly he had despised shirts, but now his neck was imprisoned in a stiff stand-up collar, and as a finishing touch a hairdresser had curled his lank tow-like locks. Several empty jugs of beer stood on his table, and in front of him sat a couple of "pals," who with their "Newgate knockers," high caps and loosely knotted neck-cloths, looked as thorough

a pair of reprobates as could be found. Toto-Chupin's haughty air and condescending smile told that he was standing treat—enjoying the superior position which belongs to those who pay over those who accept.

Tantaine was rising to go and pull the young monkey's ears, when a fresh thought crossed his mind, and he hesitated. Slowly and cautiously, mindful not to attract attention, he climbed over a couple of benches and hid himself behind one of the columns which supported the overhanging gallery. By this stratagem, the performance of which occupied at least five minutes, he found himself at last so near Toto's table, that he could hear every word the young reprobate and his associates exchanged. "You needn't call me a boaster," said Toto to his friends, "nor a dandy either; as you see me now you'll see me always, at least I hope so. A man must be properly dressed to work on a grand scale as I mean to do." His companions laughed until tears stood in their eyes. "I know what you mean," continued Toto. "You think I look queer in my new togs. That's because I ain't used to 'em. But just give me a little time, and, besides, I mean to take lessons in deportment."

"Well, well!" said one of his friends; "wonders will never cease. I say, Chupin, when you drive about in your carriage, will you give me a lift?"

"Why not? What's wanted to have a carriage? Coin of course. Well, and who are those that make coin? Why, the fellows that have a 'dodge.' Now, I know a 'dodge' that has filled the pockets of those who taught it me, so why shouldn't it fill mine?"

Tantaine was quite terrified on noticing that Toto was tipsy. What did the young rascal really know, and what was he going to say? The old man made ready to fly at the boy's throat and choke down the first compromising word.† Toto's guests also knew that he had drunk too much. But as he seemed disposed to tell them a secret, they became very attentive, and exchanged a knowing look. They were ready to believe that this precocious scamp had, as he asserted, some special way of obtaining money; for his new clothes and his liberality wore in their eyes highly suspicious. How had he got hold of so much coin? That was the question; and to induce him to talk, they freely filled his glass, each of them, moreover, offering remarks suited to hasten his revelations. The younger of the two shook his head laughingly. "I don't believe you've any dodge at all," said he.

"Yes, I have.

"And why not, after all," quoth the elder "loafer," soothingly.

"Let's hear what it is, then," interposed the other. "You can't expect us to believe it unless we know something about it."

"It's as simple as 'how do you do,'" answered Toto. "Suppose I saw Polyte there steal a couple of pair of boots from a shop front—"

At this Polyte protested with so much energy that Tantaine, who had not lost a word of the conversation, was convinced that the individual in question had some peccadillo of the kind on his conscience.

"You needn't make such a fuss about it," said Toto. "I'm only supposing a case. Let's say you did it, and that I found it out. Do you know what I should do? I should go and find Polyte, and say to him: "'Go halves, my dear fellow, or I shall peach.'"

"Perhaps you would, but I should knock you down."

Forgetting that he was desirous of seeming a regular swell, Toto made a mocking gesture familiar to Parisian gamins. "You wouldn't do anything of the kind," he cried, "for you are not a fool. You'd say to yourself;

"If I hurt this boy, he'd make a row, and then I should be arrested, and with his evidence be sent to prison." No, indeed, you wouldn't knock me down. On the contrary, you'd speak very gently, and end by doing just what I asked."

"And is that what you call your 'dodge'?"

"Yes, indeed, and a good one it is too? Fools run all the risks, and the wise men reap the profits."

"But there's nothing new in all this. It's simply blackmailing."

"I never said it wasn't. On the contrary, I'm proud to say that it's blackmailing reduced to a system." And, thereupon, Toto took up an empty jug, and calling a waiter, haughtily bade him replenish it.

In the meantime his two friends looked at each other with manifest disappointment. Toto's "dodge" was in no way new to them, nor did it strike them as especially practicable. Blackmailing is a speculation of primitive simplicity, which almost every one is acquainted with. The difficulty is to find a mine to work, and be sure it will pay for working. "Of course," said Polyte, "every now and then a good stroke of business may be done in that line; but a man isn't woke up every morning by some one shouting down the chimney: 'Come and see how I steal boots.'"

"Of course, not," answered Toto, scornfully. "The calling's like all others, a man must be active if he wants to earn his living. Instead of customers coming to you, you must search for 'em, and you find 'em too—"

"And where, pray?"

"Ah! that's the point."

There came a long pause, of which Tantaine was tempted to avail himself, so as to prevent any further revelations on Master Toto's part; but on the other hand, he deemed it wise to learn exactly what the young scamp could, and was inclined to do. So he cautiously crept still nearer to the party. Toto was reflecting. "Ah!" said he, at last, "and why not after all?" Then leaning forward, he whispered mysteriously: "I suppose I can trust you?"

"Of course you can."

"Well, then, it's in the Champs Elysées that I make my money, and I'm sure of a stroke of business not once, but twice a day."

"But there are no bootmakers' shops there?"

Clupin shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "Do you think," he said, "that I address myself to thieves? Not at all. That would be a wretched business. No, I watch honest people—people who are supposed to be honest—people who consider themselves honest. They are the ones that can be made to pay, they're the most liberal."

Tantaine shuddered. He remembered that he had heard B. Mascarot use almost the same words. Toto must have listened at the door.

"But honest people have no need to 'pay up,'" cried Polyte.

Toto cracked his glass, so heavily did he bang it down on the table. "Let me speak, will you?" he cried impatiently. "When I'm in want of funds I go to the Champs Elysées, and sit down on a bench in one of the avenues, between the main one and the quays. Then I watch the cabs, and as soon as one stops, I take a squint to see who gets out of it. If it's a respectable woman I haven't lost my time."

"And you think you know a respectable woman, do you?"

"I should say I did. When a respectable woman gets out of a cab she oughtn't to be in, she looks in an awful state of mind. She squints out of the window right and left, pulls down her veil, and when she fancies no

one's looking at her, out she scrambles, and rushes off as if the devil was at her heels."

"And then?"

"Then? why, I take the number of the cab, and follow the lady home." Tantaine saw that Toto's hearers were now deeply interested. "Then," continued the young scamp, "as I can guess she's come from seeing a lover, or doing something she oughtn't to do, I just allow her time to get up stairs into her rooms again. Then I rush into the house, go to the concierge and say, excuse me, but please give me the name of the lady who just came in. I always take care, mind, to have a pretty little purse in my pocket; and so, when the concierge looks at me suspiciously, and says, 'I don't know,' I pull the purse out of my pocket, and say, 'I'm very sorry for that, for she dropped this just outside the door, and I wanted to give it back to her.'"

Enchanted at the effect he produced, Toto paused to imbibe a huge glass of beer, and then proceeded: "The concierge at once becomes amiable and polite. She gives me the name, and the floor, and tells me to go upstairs. The first time I content myself with finding out if the lady's married or single. If she's single, I give it up; but if she married, it's all right, and up I go."

"Well, what do you do next?"

"I go again the next morning and loiter about till I see the husband go out. As soon as he's gone, I go straight to his apartments and asks to see the lady. Ah! a fellow needs all his bounce just then, I can tell you. Well, I say something like this to her. 'Madame, I took a cab, yesterday, number so and so, and unfortunately left my purse in it with four or five hundred francs. I happened to see you get into the same cab, just afterwards, and so I've called to know if you found my purse.' Well, as you can guess, the woman flares up, denies it, defends herself and so on, but I politely rejoin, 'All right, madame, I see I must apply to your husband.' Then, of course, she's frightened—and pays!"

"And you leave her?"

"Yes, for the time being. But, when my funds run low, I call on her again, and say: 'It's I, madame, the poor young man you know who lost his money in a cab number so and so, on such and such a day last month.' And when a fellow has a dozen such clients, he can live on his income! So now, pr'aps, you understand why I want to be well dressed. When I used to wear my blouse folks would have given me five francs, but now I can go and ask for a bank note."

Toto-Chupin's guests had lost their gaiety, they were evidently reflecting, and it seemed to Tantaine that each of them was minded to try Toto's "dodge," albeit that their faces expressed intense contempt. Polyte was the first to speak. "There's nothing new in this!" said he.

"No, nothing at all," added the other.

And they were right. This abominable form of speculation is as ancient as marriage, treason, and jealousy; and it seems likely to last as long as there are jealous husbands tenacious of honour, and women forgetful of their duty. Alas! who would be able to count, in Paris alone, the unhappy women who, for a brief moment of passion, long and bitterly repented of, have been subjected to the intolerable and revolting tyranny of blackmail. One day, when happy and careless, they have hurried away to a rendezvous, some scoundrel has watched and followed them, and a few days later he arrives with a prayer on his lips, and threats in his eyes to, ask

for the price of his silence. For the luckless victim life thenceforward becomes one long agony. Good-bye to happiness, serenity, and peace of mind. At each ring at the door bell, the victim starts and turns pale. "Who is coming?" she asks herself with a shudder. Is it he, that execrable scoundrel, about to make some fresh claim, some fresh demand, after the style suggested by Toto-Chupin. "Madame will not refuse a little help to the poor young man who was unfortunate enough to lose his purse in the cab, which madame took just after him."

It is only right to add, that when blackmailing in this or any other form comes under the eyes of justice, it is most severely dealt with. There are no halfway measures; but retributive vengeance falls right heavily on the guilty parties. But then how few there are who dare apply to the law for redress—who dare reveal their faults, their sins, their frailty? Despite their disdainful airs, Toto-Chupin's companions had been greatly interested by what he had told them. They had heard of blackmailing of course, their remarks proved it; but although they had plied many a shameful calling they had never thought of resorting to this one, which, as explained by Toto, struck them as being of fascinating simplicity. Hence they advisedly "ran it down," trusting that these tactics would fire Toto and make him more explicit. "All that's very fine," said Polyte. "Things like that are talked about, but they're never done."

"Yes they are," answered Toto stoutly.

"Come now, you're romancing. I bet you've never done as you've told

At any other moment the young rascal's conceit would probably have prompted him to answer, "Yes I have," but he was fuddled, and so may be excused for speaking the truth. "Well," said he, "if I've not done it myself, I've seen it done often enough—on a large scale, too—and a fellow can always imitate a big thing in a milder way with a better chance of success."

"You've seen it done, do you say?"

"Of course I have!"

"Did you lend a hand, then?"

"Yes, I did. Ah! bless my eyes, how many cabs I've followed, how many ladies and gents, real swells, all of the tip-top class! Only I wasn't working for myself! I was like the dog that catches the game and never eats it. It was hard lines, I can tell you. If I'd had a bone thrown me occasionally, even! But no, it was dry bread, and kicks and cuffs for dessert. I'm not going to stand it any longer. I've made up my mind now to go into business for myself."

"And who have you been working for like that?"

Chupin drew himself up in the most haughty fashion. Far from intending to do Mascarot the smallest harm, he thought only of extolling his merits and extraordinary ability, as if, indeed, the "governor's" glory shed some lustre on himself. "The folks I've worked for," said he, "haven't their equal in Paris. They don't stick at trifles, either, you may be certain of that—and they are so rich, it would frighten you to try and count their money! They can do anything and everything in the world they please; and if I told you—"

He stopped short, with his mouth open and his eyes dilated with terror, for in front of him stood the old clerk, that dear, good, genial Taintaine. Chupin's terror had no apparent ground, for never had the old man's face worn such a benign, good-natured look. "Ah! Toto, my boy, so here you

are!" he exclaimed in a bland, paternal voice. "Why, I've been looking for you everywhere. Mercy on me! how fine you are! Any one would take you for a young prince!"

Tantaine's kind looks and cheery voice seemed quite to disconcert poor Toto. The mere sight of the old clerk had dispelled the alcoholic fumes with which his brain had been burdened, and as he regained full consciousness he remembered how indiscreetly he had been talking. He was conscious of his folly, and had a vague presentiment of some impending misfortune, which was none the less fearful although as yet veiled in mystery. Artlessness was by no means a distinguishing characteristic of this child of Paris. His mental ability had been sharpened by stern necessity, and his intelligence was far beyond his years. Thus he at once doubted the sincerity of Tantaine's genial smile, and realised that perhaps his very life depended on the promptness of his decision at the present emergency. Had the old fellow heard anything of the conversation? Yes, or no. Everything depended on that. "If the old rascal has been listening," thought Toto, "I'm lost!" And the lad watched Tantaine with the keenest attention, as if determined to decipher this living mystery. He was skilful enough to conceal his anxiety. Silence would have betrayed his suspense, and so with affectedly boisterous gaiety he answered, "I was waiting for you, sir; and it was in honour of you that I put on my best clothes. I didn't wish you to blush for me."

"That was very good of you, I'm sure, and I'm really very much obliged."

"And now will you allow me to offer you something—a glass of beer, or a drop of brandy, perhaps?"

Toto must have been rapidly regaining his courage, for to patronise Tantaine in this way amounted almost to a piece of impertinence. But he would have done even more to exalt himself in the opinion of the two friends whom he wished to crush with his superiority. He half expected that his invitation would be most peremptorily refused. However, the old clerk graciously replied that he was much obliged, but must decline the offer, having refreshed himself only a moment before. "You haven't my thirsty disposition, sir," rejoined Chapin. And pointing with an air of pride at the empty jugs and bottles on the table, he added, "We have drank all those, my friends and I, since dinner."

This was an introduction, or intended as such, and Tantaine slightly lifted his shabby hat, while Toto's friends bowed most profoundly. These gentlemen were not altogether pleased with the appearance of the newcomer, and concluded that this would be a good time for them to make their escape, particularly as they were not without fears that Toto might repent of his generosity. At the "Grand Turo," as elsewhere, it is sometimes the invited guest who pays the score. A waltz had just struck up, and the master of the ceremonies was shouting his everlasting, "Take your places, ladies and gentlemen! take your places!" So Toto's friends shook hands with him, and bowing respectfully to Tantaine, disappeared in the crowd. "Good fellows!" muttered Toto, looking after them. "Capital fellows!" The young scamp never blushed for his companions.

Tantaine, however, whistled most contemptuously. "Ah! my boy! he said, "you keep very bad company, I fear. And you'll be sorry for it one of these days."

"I can look out for myself, sir, I fancy!"

"Go your own way, my lad. Of course it is no business of mine; but

you'll come to grief one of these days—be sure of it. I've told you so, as you may remember, more than once!"

This prediction, to which he had been so long accustomed, eased Toto of his last anxiety. "If the old rascal suspected anything," thought he, "I'm sure he wouldn't talk like that."

Unfortunate Toto! Little did he realise that at this very moment, when his spirits were going up like an india-rubber ball, his danger was most imminent. "This lad's altogether too clever!" Tantaine was at that instant saying to himself. "Too clever by far. Ah! if I were going on with our business and could make it worth his while, I should find him wonderfully useful. But just now, when we are thinking of winding up affairs, to leave such a smart lad who knows so much wandering about at his own sweet will, would be the height of imprudence on the part of people who know the importance of a stolen secret."

Meanwhile, Toto had summoned a waiter, and now threw a ten-franc piece on the table, haughtily exclaiming, "Pay yourself!"

But Tantaine pushed the money back, and handed the waiter another ten-franc piece from his own pocket. This generosity put the lad into the best possible humour. "So much the better for me!" he cried gaily. "And now, let's find Caroline Schimmel."

"But is she here? I couldn't discover her," said Tantaine.

"Because you didn't know where to look for her, then. She's playing cards in the café. Come on, sir!"

But Tantaine detained the lad for a moment. "One instant," he said. "Tell me, did you say precisely what I bade you to this woman?"

"Word for word, sir."

"Repeat to me what you said."

Chupin, who was standing, re-seated himself. "For five days," he began, solemnly, "I've literally dogged your Caroline. We've played cards until all was blue, and I took care she should rise from table—a winner. I confided to her that I had a good uncle, fifty years old or thereabouts, still fresh and alert, perhaps a little bit foolish, but awfully amiable—in short, a widower without children, who was dreadfully anxious to marry again—with a woman she knew—in fact, herself; for having seen her he had fallen head over heels in love with her."

"Well done, Toto, well done! And what did she say in return?"

"Bless my soul! she grinned like a hyena. Only, she's a suspicious sort of a cat, and I saw very well she fancied one was after her money. I didn't look as if I guessed her thoughts; but I just mentioned that my uncle had a house of his own and made some four thousand francs a year."

"And did you mention me by name?"

"Yes, at the very last I did. I knew she must have often seen you at the agency, and said to myself, 'Father Tantaine's a worthy old gent, but—' dash it all, you'll excuse me, won't you?—'he isn't particularly handsome, nor over well dressed as a rule?' To say the truth, I thought she might cut up rusty, and so I kept the name back as long as I could. But as soon as I mentioned it she looked more pleased than ever. 'I know him!' she exclaimed, 'I know him well.' So you see, M. Tantaine, that you've nothing to do now but to fix the wedding-day. Now, come on; she expects to see you to-night."

Tantaine settled his glasses with a decided gesture. "I am ready!" he said.

Toto was not mistaken. The Duke de Champdoce's former servant was

playing a game of cards, but as soon as she saw young Chupin's *soi-disant* uncle, in spite of the fact that she held a wonderfully good hand, she threw down her cards and received him with marked encouragement. Toto-Chupin looked on in delight. Never had he seen the old rascal—as he, in the recesses of his heart, irreverently termed him—so amiable, agreeable and talkative. It was easy to see that Caroline Schimmel was melting under his attractions, for never before in her life had such tender words been whispered in her ear by so musical a voice. Nor did Tantaine confine his attentions to tender words; he ordered a bowl of kirsch punch, and loving talk and fiery liquor were allowed to alternate. The old boy's long-lost youth seemed to have come back to him—he drank, and he sang, and he danced. Yes, he really took her round the waist, and drew her into the ball-room; and Toto, in open-mouthed astonishment, watched them as they whirled around. At all events Tantaine was rewarded for this super-human exertion, for at ten o'clock the marriage was arranged, and Caroline left the “Grand Turc” on the arm of her future husband. She had consented to allow him to offer her a betrothal supper at a restaurant hard by.

The next morning, when the street-sweepers came down from Montmartre, they found a woman lying face downwards on the pavement of the outer boulevard. They carried her to the nearest police station, but she was not dead as had been at first imagined; she was only stunned. When she came to her senses the poor creature stated that her name was Caroline Schimmel, that she had been to supper in a private room at a restaurant with her future husband, but could remember nothing more. At her request she was put into a cab and sent to her home, in the Rue Marcadet.

XXVII.

“It is only a master's eye that sees,” says La Fontaine, and once again the truth of this proverb was verified at the employment agency in the Rue Montorgueil. For more than a week B. Mascarot had ceased to preside in the Confessional Box, and the agency was already suffering from his absence. Continual complaints were made. Beaumarchef was all very well, but he was not Mascarot. The ex-sub-officer, frightened by his responsibility, had ventured on some timid remonstrances, but his master had so ill received him that he could only retreat with a sigh.

What indeed did Mascarot care for his agency now? Thus on the morning after Tantaine's expedition to the “Grand Turc,” while Beaumarchef answered each fresh applicant, with the same stereotyped phrase, “My master has gone out on business,” his master was in reality shut up in his own private room. On the day in question, his face bore evident marks of fatigue. His eyes were greatly inflamed, and on his table stood a cup of *tisane* which he occasionally sipped, as if to moisten his parched throat and cool some internal fire. It was plain enough that this man, generally so cold and calm—so completely master of himself—was now a prey to terrible agitation. Great generals on the eve of a decisive battle may appear unmoved to those about them, but they are none the less the victims of that feverish excitement which always precedes action. Now with B. Mascarot, the hour had struck for the supreme conflict. He was about to take a step, after which there could be no possible turning back. He was,

in fact, waiting for Catenac, Hortebize and Paul, to reveal to them his plan in its fullest details.

As usual, the first to appear was Hortebize. "I received your instructions, Baptistin," he said, as he entered, "and I have carried them out. I have just come from the Hôtel de Mussidan."

"How do they seem there?"

"Sad, but resigned. Mademoiselle Sabine was never particularly vivacious; she is graver and paler than before her illness; that's all the difference that I can detect."

"Were you alone with the countess?"

"Yes; and I told her that I was so harassed by the people who held her letters that she must be very guarded in her actions. She answered with a mournful smile, that she was in despair, but she was certain of her husband's consent, and could rely on her daughter's readiness to marry Croisenois."

Tantaine would have received this statement with enthusiasm, but Mascaret remained unmoved. However much he may have been pleased, it was coldly enough that he replied; "I saw Croisenois this morning, and if he obeys me, which I am sure he will, we shall get ahead of André, and M. de Breulh. The marquis will be Sabine's husband before they discover that the banns have been published. The marriage solemnized, we can afford to laugh at them; and, in regard to our grand idea, I have matured my plan of the company, and in a week the prospectus will be published. But to-day we have another subject for discussion, the Champdocc matter—"

At this point, he was interrupted by the arrival of Paul, who came in rather timidly, being a little uncertain of his reception after Tantaine's singular good-bye the day before. Contrary to his expectations, he was warmly welcomed. Either Tantaine had not repeated what had taken place, or Mascaret regarded it with different eyes. "Accept my congratulations," he said, "as regards your success with Monsieur Martin Rigal. You haven't morely pleased the daughter, but you've fascinated the father as well."

"I'm glad to hear it. Last evening, however, he was away."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. He dined with one of our friends, who sounded him with regard to you. If Hortebize went to-morrow in your name to ask Mademoiselle Flavia's hand, M. Rigal wouldn't refuse it."

Paul closed his eyes, dazzled by the glare of Flavia's millions.

"Hark!" interrupted Hortebize; "I hear Catenac bustling along the passage."

The worthy doctor's ears had not deceived him; it was indeed the lawyer, who came late, as usual. He did not apologise for his lack of punctuality, but tried to win forgiveness by the smiles and honeyed words he lavished on everyone in the room.

However, Mascaret hastily rose and confronted him with such a threatening mien that Catenac started back. "What the deuce do you mean?" he asked.

"Can't you guess?" rejoined the agent, in a tone that was more appalling even than his manner. "I have measured the depth of your infamy. I was certain the other day that you meant to betray us. But you gave me your word to the contrary, and you—"

"I swear to you, Baptistin—"

"No oaths, they are needless. One word alone from Perpignan en-

lightened us. Were you ignorant of the fact that the Duke de Champdoce had unflinching means of recognizing his child—that there are ineffaceable scars—”

“I had forgotten—” The words died away on his lips, for even his usually marvellous self-possession deserted him under Mascaret’s contemptuous glance.

“Let me tell you what I think of you,” continued the agent. “You are a coward and a traitor! Even convicts keep their word to each other. I knew you to be vile, but not to this degree—”

“Then why do you employ me, against my wish?”

The impudence of this reply exasperated B. Mascaret to such a degree, that he caught Catenac by the collar, and shook him as if he would have strangled him. “I use you, viper,” he cried, “because I so hold you that you cannot harm us. And you will serve me well when I prove to you that your reputation, your money, your liberty, and even your life all depend on our success. Fortunately, I know where that body is! The proofs—the most absolute proofs of your crime—are in the hands of a person who knows precisely what to do. When I give the signal he will move, and in another hour you are a lost man.” A terrible pause followed. “And it would be as well,” resumed Mascaret at last, “for you to pray that no accident may ever happen to Paul, Hortebize, and myself. If one of us should happen to die suddenly, your fate is sealed. You are warned; so now look out!”

Catenac stood with his head bowed, motionless and rooted to the ground as it were. There was a gleam of fury in his eyes, but what did the others care? He was so bound and gagged that he could move neither hand nor foot against them. No more conversation, no hope of vengeance was possible. He owed his position to blackmail, and it was now blackmail that threatened him!

Mascaret turned away, swallowed some of his *tisane*, and tranquilly, as if nothing unusual had occurred, took his seat again by the fire and calmly adjusted his spectacles, which had been deranged by the violence of his movements. “I ought to tell you, Catenac,” said he, “that with the exception of this one detail, I know far more about the Champdoce matter than you do. In fact, what do you know? Nothing in the world except what the duke has seen fit to confide to you and Perpignan, and you imagine that you are in possession of the truth, do you? You were never more mistaken. Fortunately I know the truth, and my knowledge won’t surprise you when you learn that for years I have been investigating this matter.”

“Yes, for many years,” interrupted the doctor.

“And perhaps it would interest you to know how I first got on the track of this affair. Do you remember that scrivener who had his room near the Palais de Justice, and who tried blackmailing on a large scale? Well, through an unfortunate speculation he came to grief, and was lodged in prison for two years.”

“I think I remember him.”

“He was intelligent and ingenious. He bought old manuscripts and letters, invoices, and so on, papers written upon of all sorts and kinds by weight, and he carefully sorted and read them all. It is, of course, impossible to say what treasures he found in these papers, abandoned to the rag pickers and dust-carts, but I believe he came across several. Do you think there was ever a man who hadn’t reason to regret, at least once in his life, having had pen and ink within reach at some given time! Was there ever a *cause*

celèbre in which letters did not play an important part? These facts have struck me so often and so forcibly that I ask myself why prudent people do not invariably use those inks which, after a few days, fade away and leave the paper without a mark. To be brief, I decided to follow the scrivener's example. I bought old papers, and, among other curious things, I found this." So saying he took from his desk a bit of paper, fumbled, torn, and dirty, and handed it to Hortebize, adding, "Look at it well."

Some one had inscribed on this paper, with a trembling hand, the following enigmatical assemblage of letters: "*dljheruoceahemielemnnoytipevahnec onnimaiycrem*," while beneath ran the one intelligible word, "Never!"

"It was clear to me," continued Mascarot, "that I had before me a cryptogram, that is to say, a letter composed according to particular rules and intended to place a compromising correspondence beyond all risk of exposure. Of course, it was equally clear that such a precaution was not employed in ordinary correspondence. I concluded, consequently, that this scrap of paper contained some tremendous secret."

Catenac listened to this explanation with a lofty and supercilious air. He belonged to that class of combatants who never know when their shoulders touch the ground, and who, even when exhausted and panting, persist in denying their defeat. "The conclusion seems to me evident," he said patronisingly.

"Thank you," answered Mascarot coldly. "At all events, it had to be found. I became deeply interested in deciphering this enigma—the more so, as I have the honour of presiding over an association, each individual member of which owes not only his daily bread, but even the esteem in which he is held by the world at large, to the manipulation of other people's secrets."

Hortebize smiled a wicked little smile, and with a glance at Catenac, murmured, "Take that to yourself!"

Mascarot thanked his friend with a gesture. "One morning," he continued, "I closed my door, and swore not to leave my room until I had deciphered the meaning of these letters."

In turn, Paul, the doctor, and Catenac now attentively examined the paper handed them by Mascarot. The letters seemed to them to be placed quite at random on the paper, and conveyed no sense or meaning to their minds. "No," said the doctor impatiently, "it's no use; I can make nothing out of it."

Mascarot smiled complacently. He had never been over modest, and he had, moreover, his reasons for prolonging his companions' astonishment as much as possible. "You can detect nothing?" he asked, as he took the letter from Paul's hands.

"Nothing whatever," answered Catenac sulkily.

"I assure you," resumed Mascarot, "that at the outset I was quite as much at sea as yourselves; and yet I carefully preserved this scrap of paper, soiled and old as it was—the age is evident from its hue and the faintness of the ink. A secret instinct bade me guard it closely, a presentiment seemed to tell me it meant fortune, wealth for myself and all of you. All human minds have a certain dose of curiosity, inquisitiveness, and seek to learn hidden things. Riddles, rebuses, and charades are successful ~~simply for that reason~~. It might be that, on deciphering these letters, I should only arrive at some insignificant, childish phrase—or I might, of course, make some startling discovery. The chances were equal, and this, of course, I fully realised. At the outset I had detected that there were two

distinct handwritings. If it were a woman who had composed the rebus, a man had added the word 'Never!' Was that 'never' a reply to the previous letters? If this surmise were correct, then the woman asked some favour and the man refused it. But then, why had two different languages, so to say, been employed? Why those mysterious letters, followed by this ordinary word? On reflection this is what I thought: The woman's request was of a dangerous nature, and might reveal something it was her interest to conceal, while this laconic 'never' was in no degree compromising. But how happened it, you ask, that the request and the refusal were written on the same paper? This question, also, I soon solved to my own satisfaction. This letter was never intended for the post, and never went into a letter-box. It was exchanged between two neighbouring houses, perhaps between two floors in the same house, and perhaps, who could say, between two rooms in the same apartment. In a moment of intense excitement a woman penned these mysterious letters, and sent them by a servant to a man whose help or whose pity and mercy she implored. He, in a fit of rage, snatched up a pen, wrote that one word 'never,' and then handed the paper to the servant, saying, 'Take that to your mistress.' Having settled these points in my own mind, I next attacked the enigma. I was unaccustomed to this sort of work, and I found, as you may imagine, considerable difficulty in the task; in fact, I worked fourteen hours without success. It was the merest chance that gave me the clue I was vainly seeking. While I was studying the letters, I happened to hold the paper between myself and the light, the back of it turned towards me, and to my utter surprise I read it at once. It was the simplest, most childish cryptograph in the world. The letters, instead of going from left to right, went from right to left, and to obtain the sense, it was only necessary to replace them in their proper order. I took a pencil and copied each letter in turn, beginning at the last one. 'M. e. r. c. y. i. a.,' etc. I next divided the letters into words, and obtained this significant result: 'Mercy, I am innocent. Have pity on me. Let me have our child.'

Dr. Hortebize snatched the paper from the desk.

"You are right," he said; "it is the infancy of art."

B. Mascarot smiled. "I had succeeded in reading it," said he; "but that was only the beginning. This scrap had been found among five or six hundred pounds of paper, bought at the sale of a château near Vendôme. How was it to be traced back to its possessors? I should have despaired if, in one corner—see there—I hadn't noticed the faint trace of a crest and motto, originally stamped on the paper. I knew literally nothing about heraldry, but one of my friends knew a great deal. He examined the crest with a magnifying glass, and at once pronounced it to be that of the noble house of Champdoce." At this point B. Mascarot rose, stationed himself erect, with his back to the fire, and then resumed: "That was how I started, gentlemen. Faint was the light that guided me, wavering and uncertain. Another man would probably have been discouraged; but I rarely give up an idea. I am patient, and I wake each morning with the same idea in my mind that was there when I went to sleep. Six months later, I knew that these appealing words had been addressed by the Duchess of Champdoce to her husband; and I knew under what circumstances they had been written. Since then I have fully investigated the secret first suggested to me by this scrap of paper. If I have not achieved my task earlier, it was because one single link was wanting. But I have it now; I obtained it yesterday.'

"Ah!" said the doctor; "so Caroline Schimmel has spoken?"

"Yes. The secret she kept for twenty-three years dropped last night from her tongue, which had been loosened by wine." As he spoke, B. Mascarot opened a drawer of his desk and drew out a voluminous manuscript, which he brandished with an air of triumph. "This is my masterpiece!" he cried, "and the explanation of my manœuvres for the last fortnight. After you have read this you will understand how it happens that I hold the Duke and Duchess of Champdoce and Diane de Sauvebourg, Countess de Mussidan, all in the same noose. Listen, doctor, you who have the blindest and most unquestioning confidence in me. Listen, Catenac, you who wished to betray me, and then tell me if I am in error when I affirm that I hold every element of success in my hand." He held the manuscript out to Paul. "And you, my dear child," he added, "read this aloud—I have written it more especially for you. Read it carefully, weigh every syllable, give it all the attention you are capable of; it is the history of a great and noble family. And remember that there is not one detail, however trivial it may seem, that is not fraught with importance as regards your future."

Paul opened the manuscript, and in a voice which trembled at first, but which gathered strength as he went on, he perused the heart-stirring narrative prepared by Mascarot under the title of "THE CHAMPDOCE SECRET."

END OF PART I.

PART II.

THE CHAMFDOCE SECRET.

I.

IN journeying from Poitiers to Loudon, it is best to engage a seat in the diligence, which plies between the capital of the department of the Vienne and Saumur, the gayest and most prepossessing of the many towns that stud the banks of the rapid Loire. The diligence office is but a few yards from the Hôtel de France, between the restaurant of the Coq-Hardi and the Café Castille. Travellers are received there by an exceedingly polite clerk, who in return for the advance of a five franc piece, promises a good seat in the *coups* for the following morning. "But be careful," he invariably adds, "be careful to come here, punctually at six o'clock." So the next morning the traveller has himself awakened at daybreak, dresses as quickly as possible, and hastens to the office as fast as his legs can take him. But he has hurried himself without reason. In the office there is only a stable-lad, just sufficiently awake to give a sullen reply to the questions asked of him. It is of no use remonstrating or flying into a rage, for he simply turns round on his bench, and dozes off again. Over the way, however, a shop where hot coffee can be obtained eventually opens, and furnishes a convenient refuge for those who are waiting. Half an hour afterwards, the clerk of the office turns up, yawning and rubbing his eyes. The old diligence is dragged out of the courtyard, the postilion and the ostler harness the three horses, while a couple of porters hoist the luggage and goods on to the roof of the vehicle. "Take your places, gentlemen," shouts the clerk, "take your places!" It is a false alarm. So far most of the passengers have not put in an appearance. It is necessary to wait for M. de Rocheposay, who lives in the Rue St. Porchaire, for M. Nadal, the notary, who resides near Blossac, for M. Richand, of Loudon, who arrived at Poitiers on business yesterday, as well as for several others. One by one, however, they eventually turn up, laden with parcels and carpet bags, which they stow away under their seats. At last the vehicle is full; half past seven is striking; the conductor swears a last oath, the postilion cracks his whip; and the heavy old coach rolls off, the bells of the horses gaily jingling. Down through the town go the nags at a sharp pace; the bridge across the Clain is crossed almost at a gallop; the vehicle bounds over the paving stones of the Faubourgs, the highroad is reached, and then—alas! for those who like to travel rapidly—the horses knowingly subside into the jog trot they will keep up till the end of the stage.

The driver now complacently fills his pipe, and the passengers, if they be so minded, may look out of the windows and admire the scenery. This is upper Poitou—a succession of fertile plains, far-stretching pasture lands

and dense forests. Valleys follow valleys, and as far as the eye can reach, come fields, with ruddy-tinted soil, and chestnut-trees with branches bowing to the ground, planted here and there in their midst. See here are the moors and woods of Bivron where game is most abundant; for their owner, the Count de Mussidan, has not once shot over them since he killed poor Montlouis three-and-twenty years ago. The château de Mussidan is farther off on the right hand side. Two years ago, come Christmas, old Madame de Chevauché died there, leaving all her property to her niece, Mademoiselle Sabine. On the other side of the road, half hidden by the trees of a lordly park, rises the proud castle of Sauvebourg, with its balconies and cornices, carved by one of the favourite sculptors of Francis the First. And here a few miles farther on, on the summit of an isolated hill, stands the ancient feudal manor of Champdoce, whence plains and villages and forests may be viewed for many a long mile around. How gloomy, how desolate it looks! Once the most stately pile in all Poitou, it is now falling to ruins; for, for five-and-twenty years, its owners have abandoned and seemingly forgotten it. The left wing has already half crumbled to pieces. The storms have carried away the weather-cocks and the roof. Rain and heat have rotted the shutters and window-frames, and the rusty iron balconies barely cling to the stone work.

Here, however, in 1840, there lived with his only son, the possessor of one of the most illustrious names in France—César-Guillaume de Dompair, Duke de Champdoce, three times a marquis, twice a count, and seven times a baron.

He was looked upon as a most eccentric nobleman. He might be met on the highways clad like the poorest peasant, wearing an old coat, darned and patched, a dingy leather cap and wooden shoes. In winter time he would throw an old sheepskin over his shoulders; and in all seasons he invariably carried a stout ash stick. He was then some sixty years of age, but still endowed with wonderful strength and nerve. His eyes bespoke his iron will, turning from grey to black whenever he became enraged. He had been an *émigré*, and had fought in Condé's army; and a sabre stroke had cut his upper lip in twain, leaving a scar which imparted almost a fiendish expression to his face. He was not, however, an evil-minded man, though for violence, obstinacy, and despotism, he was probably without an equal. Fortunately for those around him, his anger might be measured by his three favourite oaths. When he was merely dissatisfied he would exclaim, "*Jarnicoton!*" In a state of irritation he shouted, "*Jarnicieu!*" and when fairly enraged he burst forth into a terrible cry of, "*Jarniconnerre!*" Then was the time to keep beyond reach of his bludgeon. He was greatly feared, and the folks of Bivron bared their heads with mingled terror and respect when, followed by his son, he passed by on Sundays on his way to high mass at the church, where he had a pew of his own, the first in front of the altar. As the service proceeded he read his huge prayer-book half aloud, or sang with the choir in a deep bass voice. At the collection he regularly deposited a five-franc piece in the plate, and this weekly offering, with his subscription to the *Gazette de France*, and the five crowns a year he paid the barber who came to shave him twice a week, made up his personal expenditure. It must not be thought, however, that he starved at home; plump fowls, savoury vegetables, and exquisite fruit abounded on his table. But the *menus* were invariably limited to things that had been caught, killed, or gathered on his estates, and so butcher's meat was never seen at Champduce, for the simple reason that it would

have had to be paid for. Although frequently invited to the entertainments of the neighbouring nobility, who looked upon him as their senior representative, the duke regularly declined the compliment, declaring that no nobleman, with any feelings of self respect, could accept hospitality without returning it; and in this instance, returning it implied a pecuniary outlay.

It was certainly not poverty that compelled the Duke de Champdoce to practise such rigid economy. His estates in Poitou, in the Angoumois and Saintonge, were worth more than twelve hundred thousand francs, and this without counting the forest of Champdoce, which, skilfully managed, yielded some ten thousand silver crowns a year in timber. It was said, moreover, that his personality in ready coin and invested money was yet more considerable; and the report was by no means a false one. People, of course, looked upon him as a miser; and yet he was not one, at least, as the term is usually understood. The fact is, this obstinate nobleman was simply following out a scheme, planned after long reflection, and executed with great perseverance and energy. His past life might in some degree explain his conduct. César-Guillaume de Champdoce had, as we have already stated, emigrated from France at the outset of the Revolution. For a time he had served in Condé's army, and then, when the Empire dawned upon Europe and Legitimists were reduced to wait and hope, he had journeyed to England, taken refuge in London, and earned a scanty livelihood by giving fencing lessons. At the restoration of the Bourbons he had returned to France, and by a very great piece of good luck he had obtained possession of a part of the old family estates. But what was that part to him? He thought of the princely opulence of his ancestors, and, contrasting it with his present belongings, pictured himself in a state of miserable poverty. As an additional pang he saw a new, young aristocracy spring out of the ranks of commerce and industry, active, proud of its wealth, and ambitious to win the influence and prestige of the listless, enervated old nobility. Then it was that M. de Champdoce, whose family pride was almost a form of monomania, conceived the plan to which he afterwards devoted his whole life. He considered he had discovered a means of restoring all the past power and splendour of his house; three or four generations must sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their descendants. "By living like a peasant," said he, "by denying myself every luxury, I can triple my capital in thirty years. My son must imitate me, and in a hundred years, thanks to a colossal fortune, the Dukes of Champdoce will have regained the rank to which their birth entitles them."

In 1820, following out this scheme, he espoused, as a matter of business, a young girl who was as ugly as she was noble, but who possessed a magnificent dowry. The marriage was far from being a happy one; and folks even accused the duke of brutality towards his poor young wife, who failed to understand how a man, whom she had enriched with a portion of half a million francs, could possibly refuse her a dress she needed. However, after a year's matrimony, she gave birth to a son, christened by the names of Louis-Norbert; and six months later, worn out, no doubt, with the hard life she was compelled to lead, she died, somewhat suddenly. In his heart, her egotistical husband rejoiced rather than otherwise. He had a sturdy young heir, and the mother's fortune now belonged to him. What else did he care for? Henceforth unhindered, he might carry his mania for economy to the farthest limits. Rising before daybreak, he accompanied his labourers to the fields and toiled beside them. He attended all the fairs and markets

A person, selling his crops and live stock at the highest possible price, and haggling over a few francs like the closest-fisted peasant. As for his son, his only care was that the little fellow might grow up strong and healthy, so as to fittingly continue the task of retrieving the family fortunes.

Young Norbert was brought up like a petty farmer's son, neither better nor worse. At first he was allowed to ramble along the hedges, roll on the manure heaps, and wade about in the ponds at his own sweet will—going barefooted in summer time, and wearing wooden shoes, stuffed with straw, at winter tide. However, when he was nine years' old his rural education commenced. To begin with, he kept the cows in the pasture lands, or at the outskirts of the woods, carrying a long perch to prevent the cattle from nibbling at the young shoots. He went off at dawn, with his daily pittance in a basket, slung over his back. Then, as he grew older, he learned to guide a plough, to mow, sow, and reap, to value a standing crop at a glance, to attend on cattle and sheep afflicted with rot and foot-and-mouth disease, and finally, to drive a bargain. The Duke de Champdoce long hesitated before allowing his son to be taught to read. What was the use of education, as the lad must lead a rough, country life? Still, on the other hand, the man who cannot read, write, and count, can scarcely manage a large estate to advantage. Finally, the priest of Bivron ventured on some timid remonstrances, and his grace consented that Norbert should be taught the first rudiments of knowledge.

Everything went as the duke desired it, till Norbert reached his sixteenth year, or rather till the day when his father took him to Poitiers for the first time. At sixteen, Louis Norbert de Champdoce looked fully three years older, and was certainly as handsome a youth as could anywhere be found. His features had that pensive expression common to tillers of the soil, who live alone, absorbed in their own thoughts, face to face with nature. The sun had bronzed his cheeks and brow; he had a magnificent crop of wavy black hair, and his big blue eyes with their melancholy gleam, strikingly recalled his mother's. Poor woman! Those eyes of hers had been her only beauty. The hard labour he had been subjected to had imparted uncommon strength to his muscles, but without tampering with his graceful build, and his hands, hard as they were, were albeit of perfect shape. From a moral point of view, he was altogether a young savage. Under his father's harsh rule he had never wandered a league from the chateau, and Bivron with its sixty houses, its little church and great inn, seemed to him a delicious locality full of stir and bustle. So far he had not spoken to three strangers, and the labourers and workpeople whom the Duke de Champdoce employed feared his grace too much to talk openly in the lad's presence. He had never heard a word likely to enlighten him as to his real position, or cause him to reflect. Brought up in this fashion, he could barely imagine any life different to his own. To wake when the cocks crowed, labour all day in the fields, and fall fast asleep after supper, such seemed to him the sum total of life. Happiness in his eyes consisted in good crops; and misfortune came in the form of a severe frost or a heavy hail storm. Still he had his amusements. High mass on Sunday mornings was almost a *fête* for him; and after the service he took infinite pleasure in surveying the groups of villagers rigged out in their best clothes. At times too he eagerly listened to the discourse of some helmeted charlatan vaunting the superiority of his "pencils" or "pain killer" from the top of a travelling van. For more than a year the young peasant girls had favoured him with sheepish glances, and blushed to their ears whenever he spoke to them,

but he was far too simple to notice it. After mass, he accompanied his father on an inspection of the week's work, or else obtained permission to set snares for birds. He had no notion of real life, of the world, society, men's relations with each other, and the value of money. Somewhat alarmed by his natural intelligence, his father had purposely kept him in the dark on all these points. Such, indeed, was Norbert, when one evening the duke bade him hold himself in readiness to accompany him to Poitiers on the morrow.

The Duke de Champdoce had just received the rents of several of his tenants, as well as the price of a large stock of timber, and it was necessary he should invest this money, for he never let capital lie idle. If he took his son with him, it was because he began to feel that he must initiate him into the management of the large fortune he would one day inherit; so, soon after daybreak, they both set off in a light cart, with forty thousand francs in silver, in stout bags, under their feet. Norbert was radiant. For more than a year he had been longing to see Poitiers, which he had never visited, although it is only some five leagues distant from Champdoce. Poitiers, he it mentioned, is not precisely the gayest city in France, and many of the students there naturally sigh for Paris and the Quartier Latin. The streets are narrow tortuous and extremely ill paved. The tall black houses seem to date from half forgotten centuries. No matter, Norbert was fairly dazzled. As the horse was walked through the town, to prevent any mishap, he perceived the most beautiful, most astonishing things in the shop windows. It happened, moreover, to be market day, and such, to the lad's mind, was the stir and bustle, that he felt almost dizzy. He had perhaps never imagined that the earth contained so many inhabitants; and he was, indeed, so preoccupied that he did not notice that the horse had stopped of its own accord in front of a stylish house, having a notary's name inscribed on a bright brass plate.

"Come, come, Norbert," cried the Duke. "Here we are!"

The lad at once alighted, but his mind still wandered through the town. He helped, in purely mechanical fashion, to carry the bags of silver indoors. He did not notice the obsequious manner in which the notary received his father, he did not hear a word of the interminable conversation respecting investments that followed. His brain was busy with the marvels of Poitiers—to him an earthly paradise.

At last the duke left the notary's office, taking his son with him. They stabled the horse and cart at a large inn, on the market-place, and breakfasted off a bit of bacon, washed down with a glass of sour wine, on the corner of the common table where peasants and herdsmen were haggling and tippling. However, M. de Champdoce had not come to Poitiers merely on account of his investment. He intended, as it was market day, to avail himself of the opportunity to ferret out a miller, who had owed him a small sum for more than a year. Accordingly as soon as the frugal meal was over, he bade his son wait for him, and hurried off. Norbert was standing in front of the inn, somewhat perplexed at finding himself abandoned in the midst of so many strangers, when suddenly he felt some one touch him on the shoulder. He turned at once, and found himself face to face with a young fellow of his own age, who exclaimed with a laugh: "What! have you forgotten your old friends?"

It was a moment before Norbert recognized this young fellow; but suddenly remembering him, he responded: "Why, Montlouis, is it you?"

This Montlouis, the son of one of the Duke de Champdoce's farmers, had

formerly been Norbert's comrade. In earlier days they had oftentimes driven their cows to the same pasture lands, had spent long afternoons playing together, fishing and bird-nesting; but for five years they had not met each other. Norbert's hesitation on recognizing his old playmate, was in some measure due to the latter's costume—a tall hat and a long black coat with metal buttons. This was the uniform of the college where Montlouis was completing his studies; for whilst his grace the duke was making a peasant of his son, the humble farmer strove to turn his lad into a gentleman. Norbert was in fact so struck by the difference of Montlouis' attire to his own, that beyond a few words of recognition he could find nothing to say. "What are you doing here?" asked Montlouis, at last.

"Waiting for my father."

"Just as I am for mine. However, we've still time to take a cup of coffee together." And without waiting for his old mate's acceptance of the offer, Montlouis drew him into a little café at a few yards from the inn. The young collegian's superiority was evident, and he seemed disposed to make it yet all the more apparent. "If the billiard table were free," said he, "I should have proposed a game. To be sure it costs money, and I don't suppose your father allows you much." Norbert had never held in his hand a halfpenny bit he could call his own, and he felt cruelly mortified on hearing his friend talk like this. "My father," resumed Montlouis, "never refuses me anything. But to say the truth, I work hard, and I'm certain of two prizes this term. When I've taken my degree, M. de Mussydan will engage me as secretary—he has promised it—and I shall go to Paris, and amuse myself. And you—what do you mean to do?"

"I? I don't know."

"Don't know? Then I know for you. Why, you'll dig and toil in the fields like your father. Does it amuse you? To think you're the son of a great noble, of the richest man in Poitou, and yet you're not so happy as I, a mere farmer's son. Well, well, I suppose there's no help for it."

They parted; and when the Duke de Champdoce returned to the inn, he found his son on the spot where he had left him, and noticed nothing unusual in his manner. "Come," said the duke, "let's harness." The drive home was a silent one. Montlouis' remarks had fallen into Norbert's mind like subtle poison into pure water. Twenty careless words from an inconsiderate boy were about to destroy the result of sixteen years' patience and obstinacy. From that day, indeed, Norbert was transformed, though no one suspected it.

It is in secluded rural districts that diplomatists should go and study dissimulation. This young fellow, ignorant as he was, at least knew how to control his temper. His smiling face never revealed the storm raging in his heart; and it was with all his usual alacrity that he started each morning to perform his daily task, once pleasant enough, but now held by him in horror. To gain some inkling of his thoughts, it would have been necessary to follow and watch him. Often when he thought himself alone, he would remain motionless for hours, leaning on his spade, with contracted brows, and absorbed in dismal reflections—he, who formerly had known no more of care than the bird warbling in the bushes. His intellect, aroused by Montlouis, was now on the *qui vive*, and many circumstances which he had never before heeded, at present seemed to him so many revelations. For instance, noting his father's relations with the surrounding peasantry, he realised, that despite apparent familiarity, they were separated by a perfect chasm. He divined that he must seek for his equals among the

great landowners of the district, who lived on their estates in the summer time, and repaired on Sundays to the Church at Bivron. The old Count de Muséidan, so imposing with his snow white locks, the proud Marquis de Sauvebourg, to whom the peasants bowed so humbly, were always eager to shake hands with the Duke de Champdoce and his son. And, moreover, the most beautiful and most disdainful of the ladies of the nobility, who bore themselves like queens when they crossed the market-place, sweeping the dust with the trains of their gorgeous dresses, ay, the most imposing amongst them, seemed flattered and delighted when his grace, who, despite his coarse garments, retained the manners of the old *regime*, gallantly kissed their hands.

All this was calculated to enlighten Norbert. He felt that he was the equal of those haughty folks; and yet, what a difference there was between them and him! Whilst he and his father walked to mass in their heavy hob-nailed shoes, the others drove up in superb carriages, drawn by valuable horses, and were surrounded by footmen obedient to their bidding. What could be the cause of this difference? It certainly did not consist in the poverty of the Champdoces, for Norbert was sufficiently well acquainted with the value of lands and crops to realise that his father was as wealthy, if not even wealthier than these people. Thus everything he had heard whispered since his transformation must be true. The Champdoce labourers declared that the duke was an old miser, and that rather than spend his gold or give it to the poor, he buried it in the vaults of his castle, rising from bed in the dead of night to go and worship his treasures. "Our young master, Norbert's badly off," they said to each other. "He might have every pleasure in life, but he's treated even more severely than our own youngsters." Thereupon others would rejoin in a threatening tone, "Ah, I wouldn't stand it, if I were in his place."

The labourers were not the only ones who pitied him. He remembered very well that on one occasion, whilst his father was talking to the Marquis de Sauvebourg, an old lady who accompanied the latter, probably the marchioness in person, had looked at him most compassionately, and, carried away by her feelings, perhaps, had murmured, "Poor lad! what a pity he lost his mother so early."

What did all this mean? Did it not signify that folks pitied him, because he had to submit to his father's despotic will? To crown everything, these gay, grand nobles had sons of their own, young fellows of Norbert's age or thereabouts. He wept with jealousy when he compared himself with them. Sometimes as he trudged along, bringing a pair of oxen home after ploughing a field, he met some of these young aristocrats riding dainty thoroughbreds. If they knew him they just exclaimed, "Good day, Norbert," and galloped on. The greeting seemed almost an insult to him; these young fellows were as insolent as happiness itself and he hated them. What life did they lead in Paris, whither they invariably returned as soon as the cold weather set in? He had to sow his crops, but how did they find occupation for their hours of idleness? This was a point he could not solve, and his absolute ignorance led him to make the most absurd conjectures. He in no degree envied such "pleasures," as he had hitherto heard of. The peasantry shut themselves up in a tap-room, emptied countless flagons of wine, shouted, disputed, and finally fought together. That was what they called "amusement;" but, to Norbert it seemed just the contrary. However, the young scions of the nobility, whom he knew by sight, must have more refined enjoyments, a different gaiety to that of the tippler

stumbling home. But then came the question as to what these superior pleasures really were. Across the desert with which the paternal will had encompassed him, he divined there must be another marvellous, unknown world. Who could describe it to him? Whom could he talk to, ask for information, make his friend? He felt indignant at having been kept so frightfully ignorant, whilst Montlouis, the farmer's son, went to college. Hitherto he had yawned at the sight of a printed page, but now, although obliged to spell almost every third word, he devoted all his spare time to reading. However, this could not possibly please his father; and one evening the duke imperatively declared there was nothing he disliked so much as a bookworm. Still Norbert did not relinquish his new pursuit. Opposition only strengthened his resolution. He read in secret. He had heard that one of the upper rooms of the château was full of books, and so, picking the door lock, he entered and found a library of fully three thousand volumes, including some five hundred novels which his mother had perused in the weary, lonely hours of her married life. Norbert fell on these books like a starving man on bread. He read everything indiscriminately, without discernment or reason, jumbling the past with the present, and history with romance. Still two ideas rapidly evolved from the confusion which filled his mind. He considered himself the most wretched being on earth, and he began to hate his father. Yes, he hated him with a cold bitter hatred, with all the violence of the covetous longings that consumed him; and if he had dared—But he did not dare. The duke inspired him with invincible terror.

Such had been the situation for eighteen months, when M. de Champdoce considered it was time he should acquaint his son with his schemes, so that the lad might, in his turn, fittingly labour for the restoration of the family fortunes. It was one Sunday, after supper in the common hall, and when all the servants had retired. Never had Norbert seen his father look so solemn. Usually somewhat bowed, like all who have toiled long years in the fields, the duke had now drawn himself up to his full height. All the pride of birth, generally so skilfully concealed, glittered in his eyes. He related to his son the history of the house of Champdoce, the origin of which is lost in the legends of medieval times. He related the lives of all the heroes who had made the name illustrious. He recapitulated the honours conferred upon them, the sovereign alliances they had formed, and told what was the wealth and power of the family in the days when the Dompairs of Champdoce raised taxes like princes, possessing their strongholds and their army, and tiring out the strongest horse ere they had crossed their domains. "That is what we were," he cried in a ringing voice; "but what is left to us of all that splendour? A house in Paris, in the Rue de Varennes; this castle; a few patches of ground; a few stocks and shares; at the utmost, an income of three hundred thousand francs—barely eight millions of capital!"

Norbert knew that his father was wealthy, but not to this degree. He was stupefied on hearing these figures—eight millions! and then a thousand conflicting thoughts flashed like lightning through his mind. Eight millions! And he had to toil like a labourer who earned thirty sous a day! An income of three hundred thousand francs! And this room where he now sat listening to his father looked like some pauper's dwelling! His ancestors had had an army of retainers, and yet all the clodhoppers of the district treated him with patronising familiarity! How could he accept such humiliation and such poverty, being so wealthy and so nobly born? A first

impulse of rage almost overcame his usual timidity, and he half rose to reproach his father for his avarice and cruelty; but his strength was not in keeping with his audacity. Overwhelmed with emotion, he sank on to his stool again, unable to speak a word, choked by the sobs that rose from his heart.

The duke had not noticed this explosion of feeling. Prostration seemed to have followed the excitement with which he had recorded the glories of his house, and now he was walking heavily up and down the room, his head bowed upon his breast. "Barely eight millions," he repeated; "'tis little, very little."

Little indeed! And yet Norbert knew that not one of the so-called wealthy families of the neighbourhood possessed a third of this large capital. The Mussidaus certainly did not enjoy an income of more than eighty thousand francs. The Sauvebours, at the very most, had half as much again. There was certainly a so-called M. de Paymandour, who was said to be over and over again a millionaire; but he was by no means of authentic nobility, and, according to popular report, the origin of his wealth would not bear anything like close inspection. Thinking of all this, Norbert looked hatefully at his father, as the latter paced to and fro muttering unintelligible words; and the lad needed all his reason, all the energy of his honest conscience, to repel the frightful ideas that assailed his mind.

At last the Duke de Champdoce paused in front of his son. "My fortune is nothing," he said bitterly; "no, nothing, in these days when vain and insolent upstarts of the middle classes carry all before them. Because they have bought our estates and affixed the names of their château to their own ridiculous cognomens, they fancy they belong to the nobility, and copy, not our qualities, but our vices. The real aristocracy has not understood the times; it leads a wretched, beggarly life, and will soon die of hunger. Money is everything now-a-days; and for a Champdoce to fight against all these parvenus, all these financial princes whose escutcheon is stolen coin, he must, at the very least, have an income of a million francs. Do you hear me, my son, a million." Norbert looked at his father in astonishment; despite all his attention, he could not understand the drift of these explanations. "Neither you nor I, my son," proceeded the duke, "will ever have the capital of such an income in our coffers; but, please God, our descendants will find it in theirs. Our ancestors established the power of our house by valour and the sword; we must show ourselves worthy of them, and consolidate what they have bequeathed to us by dint of labour and privations." The old nobleman paused, and for some moments his emotion prevented him from proceeding. "Well, I have done my duty," he resumed at length, growing somewhat calmer. "It is for you to do your's. When I set about the task, I hadn't fifteen hundred thousand francs I could call my own. I have just told you what I now possess. You must imitate me. You shall marry some wealthy young girl who will bear you a son. He must be brought up like I have brought you up. By living in the same style as myself, and even if you are unlucky in crops, you will at the very least be able to bequeath your son some fifteen millions. Let him imitate us, and then, in his turn, he will leave his descendants a regal fortune! This is what must and shall be, for so have I decided."

Now, indeed, Norbert fully understood. Still he remained silent, utterly overcome with wonder and surprise.

"It is no doubt a painful task," resumed his father, "but it is by no means unknown to illustrious families. In seeking to establish a great

"house a man must live entirely in the future, and forget himself to think of his posterity. There are certainly moments when a man's frivolous or evil instincts try to gain the upper hand, but they may be crushed and stifled if you always keep your great and noble object in view. Follow my example. I only live for my descendants, and picture to myself the splendid existence they will owe to our exertions." As Norbert listened, he half fancied he was dreaming. "You have seen me," continued M. de Champdoce, "haggle for hours over a paltry twenty-franc piece. I did so, saying to myself that some day one of our descendants would nobly throw it to a beggar from his carriage window. Everything I amass is intended for them. Next year I will take you to Paris and you shall see the house we possess there. You will find it full of tapestry, such as other people cannot obtain for love or money, full of furniture of marvellous workmanship, and masterpieces of painting and sculpture. I preserve, and embellish this house as a lover embellishes the home he means for his bride; for I intend, Norbert, that it shall belong to our children, to the Dompairs de Champdoce of the future." The duke spoke in a tone of triumph, he seemingly divined the future and pictured his descendants in the proud position he had described. "If I have spoken to you in this fashion," he resumed, imperatively, "it is because you are old enough to know the truth. What I have told you must be your rule through life. You are now a man, and of your own free will you must do what you have done, hitherto, merely out of obedience. That is everything. To-morrow, you will have to load twenty-five sacks of wheat, and take them to the bakery at Bivron. You may now retire."

Norbert staggered from the room. Like all despots, unused to contradiction, the terrible old nobleman did not admit the possibility of his son hesitating. He foresaw no obstacles to his pet scheme, and yet at this very moment Norbert was swearing to himself that he would never obey his father. His rage, which fear had restrained whilst he was in the duke's presence, now burst freely forth. He had gained the broad walk, lined with old walnut trees, behind the château; and rushing along, he thundered out his despair. He pictured himself condemned, condemned beyond appeal. As long as he had imagined that his father was simply a miser, he had indulged in hope—all passions have their fluctuations; but now, despite his inexperience, he understood that such a mania as the duke's could never be shaken off. "My father's mad," he repeated, "my father's mad." Everything he had heard seemed to him monstrous and absurd, and he longed to free himself from such atrocious tyranny. But then how could he hope to gain freedom? What could he possibly do?

Alas! Evil counsellors are only too easily found, and on the very morrow, Norbert was fated to meet one at Bivron, in the person of a man named Danman, who bore the Duke de Champdoce no good will.

II.

THIS man Danman did not belong to the district, and, indeed, folks were quite ignorant of his antecedents. He asserted that he had formerly been a huissier at Barbezieux; and after all this was quite possible, nobody having made inquiries. One thing is certain, he had long lived in Paris, for he spoke of the capital like a man well acquainted with its ins-and-outs and the ups and downs of life there. He was a scraggy little fellow, some

fifty years of age, with the face or rather the snout of a weasel. With his long pointed nose, his cunning restless eyes, and his thin lips, he hardly looked the sort of a man to be trusted. He had arrived at Bivron some fifteen years previously, looking inexpressibly seedy and with little or no worldly possessions. However, he showed himself remarkably eager to make money, and was ready for anything. He had, indeed, prospered during his sojourn in Poitou, and owned fields and vineyards and even a house at the Croix-du-Pâtre, where the highway and the cross road to Bivron meet. In addition, he was rumoured to have a nice round sum in cash put by. He had no real profession, but he dabbled in everything and had a finger in every pie. He had something to do with everything that was estimated or sold. He bought standing crops of the farmers who were "hard up," and gave himself out as a clever surveyor. Those who needed money or grain for seed purposes applied to him, and providing they produced suitable guarantees, he willingly accommodated them at the rate of fifty per cent. In one word, he was the confidential adviser of all the folks with tarnished reputations, and the evil genius of all the madcaps for five leagues round. He was said to be exceedingly skilful, able to rescue anyone from a false situation. Was he really such a master of the law as he pretended? At all events, he could not speak for a minute without quoting some clause of the code. He pretended that his one great desire in the world was to improve the lot of the peasantry, and thus, whilst squeezing heavy interest out of them, he tried to stir them up against the nobility, the merchant classes and the priests. Owing to his facile verbiage, his legal knowledge, and his long frock coat, the farmers had nicknamed him the "lawyer" or the "judge." His enmity towards M. de Champdoce, dated from an occasion when he had almost come to grief. He had found himself on the threshold of the assize court, and would have been severely sentenced had he not managed to bring forward four or five false witnesses to swear in his favour. However, the duke having openly declared against him, and endeavoured to persuade the peasantry not to let him dabble in their affairs, Dauman had sworn he would have his revenge, and for the last five years he had been watching for a favourable opportunity. Such, physically and morally, was the man whom Norbert met at the mills of Bivron on the morrow of the foregoing interview with his father.

In accordance with the instructions he had received, the young fellow brought his five-and-twenty sacks of wheat from Champdoce, and unassisted he had removed them from the waggon and carried them on his shoulders up to the mill loft. He had just put on his jacket again, and was preparing to return home, when Dauman approached him, and bowing to the ground begged him to give him a lift as far as his house. "I hope," said he, "that Monsieur le Marquis will excuse the liberty I take in asking for this favour, but the rascally rheumatism that troubles me prevents me from walking. I'm growing old and weak, Monsieur le Marquis."

Dauman knew how to give folks their fitting titles; he had read that a duke's son was known as a marquis, and so he lavished the appellation on Norbert. It was the very first time that the latter had ever been so addressed. A few days earlier, his common sense would have induced him to look on the flattery for what it was worth, but now his famishing vanity was delighted. "Yes, I've a seat for you, 'judge,'" said he, "I'm only waiting for a sack that was forgotten at the last delivery."

Dauman made a low bow, and smiled obsequiously. But whilst expressing his thanks he watched Norbert, askance, and noting that the lad's

features had a most unusual expression, he said to himself: "Something out of the common must have happened at the château de Champdoce." Perhaps the opportunity to revenge himself, which he so longed for, was about to be offered; indeed, he had a presentiment to that effect, and reflected that he might surely and terribly strike the father through the son. However, one of the mill hands had just brought the sack Norbert was waiting for. Dauman climbed into the waggon and settled himself on some straw, whilst the young marquis sprang on to one of the shafts and started his horses. At first the "judge" remained silent; he was thinking with what trivial remark he might best open the conversation he desired to have with his noble young driver. "You must have risen betimes, Monsieur le Marquis," he began at last, "to have finished your work so early." Norbert offered no rejoinder. "His grace the duke," resumed Dauman, "is lucky indeed, to have such a son as yourself. I know more than one father in Bivron, who says to his lads: 'Look at the example our young marquis sets. He doesn't shirk work for fear of hardening his hands, and yet he's a noble, and wealthy too, and might cross his arms if he chose and let others work for him.'" Here a sudden lurch interrupted Dauman's verbiage, but he soon began again. "I was watching you as you lifted those sacks of wheat; they seemed like feathers in your hands! What muscles! What shoulders!"

At any other time Norbert would have been delighted to hear this praise, but it now displeased and irritated him, as the way he whipped up his horses plainly showed. "There are impudent busy-bodies" resumed Dauman, growing bolder and bolder, "who dare to deride you, Monsieur le Marquis, because you are as well conducted as a young girl; but I always reply that you are a sensible fellow. A regular life is far better for a man's health and purse than wasting time and money on billiards and women, like a number of young fellows I know of, do."

"But I should do just the same, if I could," answered Norbert with sullen frankness.

"What did you say?" asked his companion, who looked amazed, although he had heard perfectly well.

"I said that if I were my own master I should live like other young men."

He stopped short, but Dauman's eyes flashed with joy. "Ah, ha!" he said to himself, "the game's in my hands. I'll teach the duke not to meddle with my private affairs." And then speaking aloud, he added: "Some parents are certainly too severe!" A gesture of Norbert's showed him he was on the right track. "Yes, it's always the same," he continued. "Men grow old, their hair falls off, their blood runs slow, and they forget the days when things were different. They forget that young men must sow their wild oats. Your father was very different when he was young."

"My father!" exclaimed Norbert in surprise.

"Yes, ask his friends, if you doubt what I say!"

The waggon had now reached the cross roads. "Here we are," said Dauman. "How shall I thank you, Monsieur le Marquis? If you would allow me to offer you a glass of real cognac, I should esteem it a great honour."

Norbert hesitated. Instinct warned him that he was doing wrong, that he had better refuse, but he would not listen to his forebodings. He tethered his horses, and followed the "judge" indoors. The house had a comfortable aspect. Dauman was served by an old woman, a stranger to

the province like himself, and of somewhat questionable reputation, albeit exceedingly devout. She was certainly on terms of surprising familiarity with her master. The latter's "study" as he called it was almost as ambiguous as himself. A stock of pigeon holes ran along one wall; there was a desk covered with ledgers; sacks of wheat and rye stood in sundry corners; a book case replete with legal tomes faced the fireplace, while from the ceiling hung numerous bunches of dried herbs. It was with great respect that the "judge" ushered the son and heir of the Duke de Champdoce into this apartment. He brought forward his own leather chair, and, as soon as his guest was seated, went in person to the cellar whence he speedily returned with a venerable looking bottle. "Taste this, Monsieur le Marquis," he said, when he had filled two glasses. "A grower at Archiac gave me this brandy in return for a great service I did him; for, let me tell you without boasting, I have done many people a good turn in my time." So saying, he raised his own glass and smacked his lips. "Good, is it not? One can't buy anything with a bouquet like that!"

All this obsequiousness was not thrown away, for in less than half an hour Norbert had opened his heart. His conduct was in some measure excusable. He was in one of those situations when it is positive relief to be able to confide a secret to any one, and besides he knew little or nothing of the "judge's" true character. So he poured forth his most secret thoughts. The story was a long one, and Dauman chuckled secretly as he listened; though all the time, he retained the grave face of a physician, called in for a serious consultation. "This is frightful!" he said, at last. "Poor fellow! were it not for the respect I owe to Monsieur le Duke, I should say he was not in full possession of his intellectual faculties."

How could such a lad as Norbert distrust such marks of commiseration? "Well, as I've just said," he continued with tears of rage starting from his eyes, "That's the way I'm situated! My destiny is settled, it seems, and I'm helpless. Unless, indeed, I kill myself." And he added with clinched teeth, "After all, it would be better to rot underground than lead such a life as mine." At these words Dauman smiled so singularly that Norbert asked, "Do you think that a mere child's threat?"

"By no means, marquis; you have suffered too much not to have thought of suicide; but excuse me if I say that you are foolish to talk in this way of your future."

"Future!" cried Norbert angrily. "Why do you talk to me of a future, when you know that my present life may endure twenty years more? My father is young still."

"What of that? In three years you will be of age, and then you will have a right to claim your mother's fortune." Norbert's astonishment convinced the "judge" that the youth was even more simple than he had supposed. "When a man reaches his majority," continued Dauman, in an explanatory tone, "he may claim whatever he is legally entitled to. Such is the law. Your mother's fortune would render you independent of your father."

"But how could I ever dare to claim it?"

"It would not be necessary for you to claim it in person. A notary would transact the business. Of course, you have to wait three years before making the demand?"

"But that's impossible," answered Norbert. "I can never wait. I must put a stop to this tyranny at once."

"Fortunately there are ways—"

"Do you think so, 'judge'?"

"I will point them out. If you were of age, I would suggest applying to the courts to have your father placed under interdict, as, being afflicted with monomania, he is unfit to manage his fortune properly. That is done every day in great families. But then, unfortunately, you are *not* of age. Let us think of something else." Worthy M. Dauman swallowed another glass of brandy, and then resumed, "You are eighteen, and wish to escape from your father's tyranny. Well, to begin with, you might enlist as a soldier."

"Ay," exclaimed Norbert, "that's always a resource."

"A bad one, *marquis*, believe me. However, you might forward a complaint to the Public Prosecutor."

"A complaint?"

"Yes. Do you suppose our laws do not provide for the case of a father abusing his authority? Tell me, has your father ever struck you?"

"Never."

"Never mind, you might say it all the same; and besides you could urge that you are not brought up in accordance with your rank, that you are denied the advantages of education, that you are treated as a servant, whilst your father is several times a millionaire. All those points would hit hard; and, besides, all the countryside would bear testimony that you are pitied by everyone, and commonly known as the little Champdoce savage."

Norbert started to his feet. "Who ever dared to speak of me in that way?" he cried, in a threatening voice. "Name him."

This explosion in no way amazed the "judge," who had indeed artfully provoked it. "Be calm, be calm, *Monsieur le Marquis*," he answered, adding as Norbert resumed his seat, "The term is used by all your enemies, or rather by your father's foes, and I can tell you they are no few in number, thanks to his despotic habits. You yourself might count many friends. For instance, several ladies of your own rank take great interest in you. Only the other day, *Monsieur le Marquis*, when you were being spoken of, *Mademoiselle Diane de Sauvebourg* turned scarlet at the mere mention of your name. Do you know *Mademoiselle Diane*?"

The young man flushed. "*Sufficit*," resumed Dauman. "Well when you are free you will do as you please. And now, in reference to your complaint—"

But Norbert, who had just caught sight of the clock, started up once more. "Twelve o'clock," said he, "dinner-time. What on earth will my father say?"

"Are you afraid of him as much as that?" asked the "judge" with a touch of sarcasm.

But Norbert did not hear the taunt; he was already in the road, and, springing into his waggon, drove off at full speed. Standing on the threshold of the house, Dauman gazed after him. "Make haste, my lad," said he. "You didn't say good-bye; you'll come again. I've a third little plan in my mind to rid you of your father, and that's the one you shall adopt. Ah! ah! my Lord Duke of Champdoce, you wanted to send me to the galleys, did you? Well, you shall see where I'll send your son."

III.

DAUMAN had not exaggerated when he said that Norbert was generally called, "that little Champdoce savage," only no one attached an insulting meaning to the nickname. At that time gold was god in Poitou, and it would have been blasphemy to outrage the son of a man who had an income of three hundred thousand francs. It should be mentioned that among the nobility, opinions had singularly changed in reference to the Duke de Champdoce during the course of twenty years. He had been laughed at the first time he was seen wearing a rough jacket and wooden shoes; but he did not care a straw for this merriment, relying on the power and respect his great wealth must ultimately conduce to; and he was right. When the nobleman's neighbours saw him add vineyards and pasture-lands and fields of wheat and rye to his ancestral forest, they began to reflect. Though they had not the courage to imitate him, they admired his energy and perseverance. He was no longer a madman in their eyes, but the masterly manager of a superb estate. And after all, was the son really to be pitied? Would he not ultimately possess the largest fortune in the province? Mothers were especially interested in Norbert, and thought what a triumph it would be, if they could only marry a daughter of theirs to the Champdoce savage. But then his father watched him most jealously; the lad was seemingly not to be got at.

However, the task which mothers considered too difficult to grapple was to be attempted by a young girl, audacious Mademoiselle Diane de Sauvebourg. She was rightly considered to be one of the beauties of the province. She was tall and very fair, with abundant sunny hair, a milk like complexion, and a charming smile. In her eyes, however, there gleamed at times the fire of concentrated energy and ambition. She had been educated at a convent, and her parents had wished her to take the veil; but at her own repeated request, and at the earnest solicitation of the Lady Superior, who was kept in a constant state of anxiety by her threats to scale the walls, they had recently called her home. Her father was wealthy, but she had a brother ten years older than herself, and the Marquis de Sauvebourg had openly declared that he meant to arrange matters, so that the entire property should go to the heir of the name. All he could do for his daughter, said he, was to give her a trousseau, and a dowry of 40,000 francs. She must renounce all other expectations. "So I suppose, my girl," he added, speaking to Diane, "that you have come home, armed and equipped to conquer a husband. Study your cards, mind; for if you don't succeed, I've virtually nothing to offer you."

Diane had quite accustomed herself to the idea of being disinherited in her brother's favour, so she quietly replied, "Well, I'll have a try; and, at all events, it will be time enough to shut me up in a convent again in ten years from now."

M. de Sauvebourg had roundly blamed M. de Champdoce for sacrificing his son, but to sacrifice his daughter seemed natural. "I shall succeed," thought the girl; "I know it." And indeed, one day when a friend of her father's spoke of Norbert, and the great fortune he would one day inherit, in her presence, she asked herself, "Why shouldn't I marry him?" In fact, she at once decided to try and fascinate the

"Champdoce savage." It would be bliss indeed, to become a duchess with an income of three hundred thousand livres. Of course there would be the old duke and his avarice to contend against, and besides, she must first of all see Norbert and try and study his character. He was pointed out to her at church, and she was struck by his handsome looks and noble bearing, which even his shabby garments could not hide. Moreover, with feminine intuition, she divined that Norbert suffered, and a feeling of pity crept into her heart. Pity leads to love, remember; and when Diane left the church she had taken a solemn oath to be Norbert's wife. However, she did not breathe a word of this to her parents, preferring to carry on her designs without counsel. She was at once determined and practical, prudent and calculating. She had learned many things at the convent where she had been brought up, and frank and open as was her expression, she possessed considerable insight into character, and never lost sight of the main chance. To carry out her plan, however, she must meet Norbert and talk to him under favourable circumstances. To her parents' surprise, she suddenly seemed inspired with interest in the poor and made it her occupation to relieve them. She was constantly to be met in the lanes carrying soup or meat to some of her *protégés*, and her father exclaimed, "Diane has missed her vocation; she was evidently meant to be a Sister of Charity." He did not notice, however, that the poor folks she took an interest in all lived near Champdoce. Meanwhile, several days elapsed, and her wanderings proved vain. The "Champdoce savage" seemed invisible, and, to make matters worse, she did not even have the consolation of meeting him at mass.

The fact is, Norbert had changed his life. One evening, a week or so after the conversation in which the duke had confided his hopes to his son, he again detained him after supper. It was harvest-time, there were still several sheaves to be got in, and Norbert was on the point of starting off again with the labourers when the duke bade him remain. "The way I confided in you the other night," said the old nobleman, "should have warned you that a great change was about to take place in your position. In future you will not toil as you have hitherto done. I mean to allot you less tiresome but more difficult duties. You shall act as overseer of the estate." Norbert looked up quickly, and his father resumed, "You are no longer a child, and I wish you to become accustomed to independent action, so that at my death you may not be intoxicated by your liberty." With these words the duke rose and produced a very beautiful gun. "I am pleased with you," he continued, "and this is the token of my satisfaction. My forester has this morning brought me a fine dog, which is also to be yours. A young man must have some relaxation, and in your spare time you may shoot over the domain. In going about you may have to incur some trifling expenditure, and so here is some money which I beg you to husband; for remember that the least prodigality will certainly delay the restoration of the family fortunes." The old nobleman talked on for some time in this strain; but Norbert literally heard nothing. He was even too stupidified to take the six five-franc pieces which the duke held out. His strange manner was certainly not to the liking of M. de Champdoce, who at last impatiently exclaimed, "Eh! *Jarnicoton!* I thought this new arrangement would please you."

With a great effort, Norbert managed to stammer, "Yes, certainly it does. You will find that I'm not ungrateful."

The duke looked at him in surprise, turned his back, and hurriedly strode

away. "What does the boy mean?" he muttered. "Could the curé have been right?"

The fact is, this new arrangement, as his grace called it, had been pressingly advised by the only man M. de Champdoce ever condescended to listen to—the village priest of Bivron. However, the relaxation came too late. Norbert's hatred against "his tyrant," as he called his father, was too deeply rooted to be so easily dispelled. And besides, what was this great concession after all? A gun, and a matter of thirty francs in all! It would have been different had his father decided to complete his education; but no, he was still to remain the "Champdoce savage." Nevertheless, availing himself of his father's authorisation, he spent long days in the cover, less engaged in shooting than in thinking over his position. In his rambles he was invariably accompanied by the dog the forester had brought for him, and the animal was so intelligent and faithful that he felt he had found a friend. He still thought of Dauman; and although he had asked questions, and ascertained that the "judge" was a most dangerous man, who would stop at nothing, he none the less determined to return to him for further advice. It was in vain that conscience warned him; he spurned its counsels, longing more ardently than ever for the life of freedom and enjoyment he had dreamed of.

IV.

DAUMAN was expecting to see him, as certain of his coming as the bird-catcher of a capture, after carefully arranging his perfidious mirror. Had he not ensnared Norbert with a mirage of enjoyable liberty? Dauman, like all who speculate in cupidity and misery, had his spies everywhere, and knew precisely what was going on at the château. He even knew the very words the duke had used during this last conversation, and was aware of the privileges granted to Norbert. Still, he was convinced that by this relaxation M. de Champdoce only hastened his son's revolt. Of an evening after dinner he often roamed along the high road, with his pipe in his mouth, and whenever he sighted the château de Champdoce, he was wont to shake his fist at it threateningly, and mutter, "He'll come back! Yes, he'll come!"

And indeed, a week later, one day when Norbert was supposed to be shooting as usual, he knocked at the door of his father's enemy. From his window Dauman had seen him approach, and it was with quite as much respect as before that he received "Monsieur le Marquis," as he took good care to call the lad. Still, he seemed embarrassed, and in lieu of saying anything to the point continued repeating, "Your very humble servant, Marquis; your very humble servant."

Norbert, who had expected a very different greeting, was disconcerted by this coldness, and thought of withdrawing. However, his vanity withheld him, and he said to himself that if he retired without attempting anything, the "judge" would certainly consider him a fool. So, mustering up his courage, he began, "I wish to consult you, M. Dauman. As I have no experience of my own, I desire to avail myself of yours."

"I am sure, sir—I am sure—" replied the "judge" with an absent air.

"Come," exclaimed Norbert, "you really ought to help me after what you said the other day. When I left so hurriedly you were explaining the different plans I might resort to with the view of altering my position."

"Do you really remember those idle words I uttered?" asked Dauman with an admirably affected air of embarrassment.

"Most certainly I do."

The rascal was inwardly delighted; still he rejoined with a forced smile, "Oh, you know, sir, a great many things are said which mean nothing. There is a wide distance between intention and act. I am so outspoken that my tongue is apt to get me into trouble."

Norbert was no fool, and besides, the hot blood of the Champdoce race coursed in his veins. "You took me for a fool, then, it seems," he asked indignantly, striking the floor with the butt end of his gun.

"Oh! Monsieur le Marquis!"

"And you fancy that you can trifle with me. You induced me to open my heart to you; but your amusement may cost you dear."

"Monsieur le Marquis! is it possible you suppose me guilty of such infamy?"

"Then what on earth do you expect me to think of your conduct?"

Dauman hesitated at first; but suddenly seeming to regain courage he exclaimed, "You will be angry, but I must tell you the truth."

"I shan't be angry. Speak without fear."

"Well, Monsieur le Marquis, this is the case. I'm only a poor man, and can't afford to run any risk. What could I gain by encouraging you to brave your father? Why, it's madness to think of opposing the powerful Duke de Champdoce! He would take such steps that I should be popped into prison in the twinkling of an eye."

"And why, pray?" asked Norbert.

"Have you never studied law at all, marquis? Good heavens! how negligent parents are! You are not nineteen yet, and I know a certain clause in the code which could be twisted in such a way that your humble servant would simply be shut up in durance vile for five years. The law severely punishes any one who tampers with a minor, the son of a millionnaire to boot. If your father ever discovered—"

"How could he ever learn it?"

Dauman did not answer, and his silence so clearly signified disbelief in Norbert's discretion that the youth indignantly repeated his question.

"Well," said the "judge," "to speak frankly, you are a dutiful son, and besides, you fear your father so much—"

"You think I should tell him everything if he asked me?"

"Well, you yourself told me that when he looked at you in a certain way you couldn't resist him."

"I may be a savage," rejoined Norbert, "but I'm not a traitor. When I promise to keep a secret, neither threats nor torture could extract it from me. Certainly I fear my father; but I am a Champdoce, remember, and prize honour above aught else. Do you understand me, sir?"

"But—"

"No human being," interrupted Norbert, "shall ever know from me that you have spoken to me. I swear you that."

As the "judge" listened, his features gradually assumed that expression of sympathetic interest which had originally inspired Norbert with confidence in him. "People might think," said he, "by my hesitation, that my object was an evil one. However, it is not my habit to give bad advice; I know the law besides. Behold my breviary, my rule of conduct." And so saying he proudly brandished a volume of the code.

"Well," exclaimed Norbert hastily, "now that I have given you a solemn promise of secrecy, will you tell me what I am to do?"

Dauman winked as he answered, "Nothing, marquis—bide your time, you have only three years to wait. Be patient. Your father is an old man. Let him nurse his hobby for three years more, and—"

But he was suddenly cut short by Norbert, who, bringing his fist down with a bang on the table, exclaimed, "If that's all you have to say, I am sorry I came." At the same time he turned as if to leave the room.

"You are too hasty, marquis," rejoined the "judge."

The young man hesitated. "Well, go on then," he said abruptly.

"Please, justice, marquis," resumed Dauman, "that while advising you to be prudent, I don't suggest that you should endure all the hardships you have hitherto had to bear. In fact, I should simply like to see you both happy. I am like a justice of the peace seeking to reconcile two adversaries. Now, while seeming to be submissive, can't you arrange a plan of life for yourself?" Norbert returned to the centre of the room. He wondered what the "judge" was driving at. "You have more liberty already, I think," continued Dauman. "Does your father know how you employ it?"

"What can I do but shoot

"Well, I know very well what I should do if I had your age.

"What would you do?"

"To begin with, I should stop at home just enough to avoid all suspicion, but the rest of the time I should spend at Poitiers, which is a very pleasant town. I should rent there a nice apartment, where I could be my own master. At Champloce I should perforce wear my old coat and wooden shoes, but at Poitiers I should wear clothes made by a good tailor. I would find some jolly companions among the students; have male and female friends; dance, sing, and generally amuse myself." He hesitated for a moment, and then abruptly asked, "There ought to be some fast horses among those your father breeds? Very well, then; why not take one for your own use. In the night, when you are supposed to be sound asleep, you could quietly slip out of doors, with your gun and spaniel, mind, harness the horse, and reach Poitiers in a wink. Then dress yourself like the handsome young lord you are, and join your friends. If you don't choose to go home the next day, well, seeing neither gun nor dog, folks would think you were out shooting."

Norbert was naturally straightforward, and the idea of this duplicity was intensely repugnant to him. Still it was the natural result of circumstances. On the other hand, the coarse picture of pleasure, sketched by Dauman, appealed to his imagination with such force that his eyes sparkled with covetous longing. "What is there to prevent your doing this?" asked Dauman, insidiously.

"The lack of money," sighed Norbert. "A large sum would be needed, and I have none. If I asked my father he would refuse, and besides—"

"Have you no friends who would consent to oblige you for three years?"

"None whatever." And Norbert, overwhelmed by a sense of his powerlessness, dropped heavily on to a chair.

For a moment Dauman remained reflecting. It seemed as if a struggle were going on in his mind. "Well, no, no, Monsieur le Marquis," he exclaimed at last, "I can't see you unhappy without doing my best to save you. It's a foolish thing to slip one's fingers between the bark and the tree, but no matter; I'll risk it. Some one shall lend you what you want."

"You, 'judge'?"

"Unfortunately, no. I'm only a poor devil; but I have the confidence of several of the farmers hercabouts, who bring me their savings to invest for them. Why shouldn't I secure them for you?"

Norbert caught his breath. "Can it really be managed?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes, marquis. Only you must understand it will cost you dear. The interest will be far above the legal rate, on account of the risk incurred. The law does not recognise such transactions, and I myself don't approve them. In your place, I shouldn't borrow this money, but wait until some friend can accommodate you."

"I have no friends," was Norbert's reply.

Dauman shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "Decide as you please, I wash my hands of the consequences," and then he exclaimed aloud, "After all, marquis, this would be but an insignificant matter, given the great wealth you will come into one of these days." Thereupon he explained in full detail on what conditions he could consent to part with the funds intrusted to him by his clients, the farmers, pausing at each particular point to ask, "Do you understand me, marquis?"

Norbert understood so well that in exchange for two thousand francs in banknotes he joyfully signed two 10 U's of forty thousand francs each in favour of a couple of petty farmers of bad repute, who were entirely under Dauman's thumb. The young fellow, moreover, gave his word never to disclose to any one that the "judge" had had anything to do with the transaction.

"Prudence, marquis! That must be the rule of your life. Come here only after dark." Such was Dauman's parting advice to his client; and as he stood alone in his office, he carefully re-perused the acknowledgments, which Norbert had given in exchange for the money. Yes, he had forgotten nothing. His knowledge of the law had served him well. These 10 U's would certainly be paid when the marquis came into his property, if merely to avoid a scandal. The wily trickster intended to let Norbert have all his savings, some forty thousand francs, on similar terms, so as to be able to claim a perfect fortune on the day the lad succeeded to his father's title. It is true that all this fine plan hung on Norbert's discretion, for at the first suspicion the duke would turn round and spoil everything. However, all things considered, Dauman felt pretty sure that the young marquis would keep his promises of secrecy.

As Norbert walked home, he was compelled to keep his hand in his pocket and feel the crisp, silky bank-notes to satisfy himself that it was not all a dream. That night seemed a year long; and at day-break, with his gun and dog, he strolled along the road to Poitiers. "I will hire a small apartment," he said to himself, "and make the acquaintance of some of the students to begin with."

In fact, he meant to do precisely what Dauman had advised. However, he reached Poitiers, which he had only visited on one occasion, and at sight of the houses and people felt terribly confused and embarrassed. He sauntered along the streets not knowing how to begin, not daring to enter a shop or make a single inquiry. He was like a newly fledged bird, at a loss how to use its wings. At last, feeling cruelly mortified, he went to the inn on the market-place, where he had been with his father, and, after an unsatisfactory breakfast, returned, sadly downcast, to Champdoce. Late that evening he saw Dauman, and related his misadventure, which greatly amused the worthy "judge." But the latter was a man of resources, and

so he kindly put the young marquis in communication with a friend of his, who, for a good commission, piloted him about, hired furnished apartments for him, and took him to a tailor, of whom he ordered such clothes as he needed. Norbert was now elated again, and fancied himself on the high-road to the gratification of his desires; but the result was far below his hopes. He was too timid and ignorant to enjoy himself. He needed a friend and knew not where to find one. One evening he entered the Café Castille, and although it was then the long vacation he met several students there. But their noisy merriment scared him, and he hastily withdrew. Thus he lived alone at Poitiers as at Champdoce, spending most of his time in the rooms he had rented, in the company of his dog Bruno, who would certainly have preferred the open fields. Altogether, he only had five enjoyable evenings which he spent at the theatre; and to attain this paltry result, he had to lead a life of perpetual dissimulation. M. de Champdoce had noticed his son's frequent absence from home; but his surmises were far from the truth. One morning, however, he rallied Norbert on his lack of success in the cover, for the lad seldom brought as much as a hare or a rabbit home. "Come, Norbert," said he, "do your best to-day. Let's have a full bag this time, for we shall have a friend to dinner to-morrow."

"To dinner! Here?"

"Yes," said M. de Champdoce, repressing a smile, "yes, here! M. de Puymandour is coming. The grand dining-room upstairs must be opened and put in order."

Norbert took up his gun and whistled Bruno. He was sorely perplexed as to what this visit meant. At all events, he could not spend the day at Poitiers, and it was essential he should shoot something. However, he was by no means an able marksmen, and throughout the morning he rambled far and wide, burning a good deal of powder without result. About two o'clock, however, he was approaching the moors of Bivron, he fancied he could distinguish an imprudent rabbit, nibbling near a hedge. Now was his opportunity. He raised his gun, fired—heard a shriek of pain or fright—and Bruno at once dashed into the hedge, barking furiously.

V.

DIANE DE SAUVEBOURG was the veriest woman that ever breathed. This seemingly artless girl, apparently occupied with a thousand frivolous whims, really possessed an iron will, and would have died before renouncing her project of becoming the Duchess de Champdoce. So far, all her rambles had been fruitless. The weather had become uncertain, and she would soon have to give up her long strolls round about Bivron and Champdoce. Still she clung tenaciously to her idea. "The day must come," said she, "when the invisible prince will appear!"

The day came. It was mid November, and the weather was extremely mild for the season. There was a blue sky overhead, the last leaves on the trees fluttered in the breeze, and the blackbirds sang in the hedges. Diane de Sauvebourg was walking along the path leading to Mussidan from the Bivron woods, when suddenly she heard a crackling of branches in the copse on her left hand. She turned at once, feeling somewhat startled, and all her blood seemed suddenly to rush to her heart, for through an opening in the hedge she caught sight of the very man she had

been watching and waiting for during two long months. Norbert was cautiously advancing, his forefinger on the trigger of his gun, as if about to take aim at something he was watching. Emotion kept Diane spell-bound. She faintly realised the difference between intentions and facts, and all the phantasmagoria of her imagination vanished. Here was the very occasion she had so long and patiently watched for, and yet she could draw no advantage from it. What would happen ! Norbert would simply bow to her in passing, she would return his salutation, and then she might wait another two months for a second meeting. How could she engage any conversation with him ? Was there any possibility of her doing so ? She was just deciding to make some heroic effort, when she saw Norbert level his gun in her direction, he was taking aim. She wished to warn him, but ere she had time she felt a sudden, sharp pain in one leg just above the ankle. With a shriek she raised both arms and fell at full length on the path-way. Still she did not faint, for she heard the report of the gun, a cry of alarm in reply to her own, and a crash through the underwood. Presently she felt a hot breath on her face, and then the touch of something cold and damp. She opened her eyes and saw Bruno licking her hands. At the same moment the hedge was torn apart and Norbert appeared before her. She at once realised the advantages of her position and closed her eyes again.

Norbert, as he stood over this fair creature, stretched white and motionless before him, felt as if he were going mad. He had killed Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg, and at the thought, his first impulse was to take to his heels, his second, to aid his victim. He knelt beside her, and soon perceiving she could not be dead, carefully raised her head, exclaiming, "Mademoiselle, I beseech you, speak to me !" But she did not speak at once. She was absorbed in returning thanks to Heaven for her granted prayer. Presently she stirred, however, slowly raising her eyelids, and looked at Norbert with the surprise of a person just roused from sleep. "It is I," stammered the poor fellow—"Norbert de Champdoce. Will you pardon me ? Are you suffering ?"

He seemed so distressed, that Diane really pitied him ; so repelling his arm, she gently said, "It is for me to beg your pardon, sir, for fainting in this foolish way ; for I am really more frightened than hurt."

Norbert breathed again. "However, I will go for help," said he.

"By no means. It is a mere scratch ;" and she drew her skirt a little aside and showed an ankle that would have turned a steadier head than Norbert's. "Look !" said she, "it is there ;" and she showed a spot of blood staining her white stocking.

Seeing this, Norbert's fright returned, and he started up. "I will run to the château," he said, "and in less than an hour—"

"No, do nothing of the kind," interrupted Diane. "It is really nothing. Look ! I can move my foot perfectly well."

"But I beg of you—"

"Hush ! we will soon see what it is ;" and ripping her stocking with a pen knife she began to examine her wound. It was as she had said—nothing. Two shots had struck her—one had grazed the skin only, and the other had lodged in the flesh ; however it was on the surface.

"You must have a surgeon," urged Norbert.

"For that ? No it's not worth the trouble !" And with the point of her knife she loosened the tiny shot, which dropped on to the ground.

Norbert was gazing in ecstasy at this beautiful young woman. He had

never heard a voice like hers before. He had never seen anyone so lovely, and he seemed perfectly entranced.

In the meantime Diane had torn her handkerchief into four strips, which she tied around her wound. "Now I am all right," she said gaily, at the same time extending her pretty slender hands to Norbert, that he might help her to rise. Once on her feet, she took several steps with a slight limp.

"But you are suffering!" cried Norbert, in despair.

"No, I am not, indeed; why, I shall have forgot it this evening," rejoined Diane, and she laughed like a merry school-girl, as with a little teasing air she added, "this is a droll meeting, *marquis*."

Norbert was struck by the way in which Diane uttered the word *marquis*, for no one save Dauman had ever before given him this title. "She does not despise me!" he thought.

"This melodramatic adventure will be a lesson to me. *Maman* always insists on my keeping on the highway, but I prefer this path on account of its lovely view." So saying, she extended her hand, and it seemed to Norbert that a curtain rose, as in a theatre, and that he saw the familiar scenery for the first time. "Although it is very wrong to disobey *maman*," continued Diane, "I come this way nearly every day when I go to see poor old mother Besson! Poor woman, she's dying of consumption; still I try to save her with nourishing food—good meat and soup. It is the only chance." She spoke on as unctuously as a Sister of Charity, and in Norbert's opinion, only lacked wings to be an angel. "The poor woman," she continued, "has three children, and their father does nothing for them, for he drinks all he earns."

Norbert had indited one of his I O U's for 4,000 francs in the name of this very Besson. He was, according to Dauman, one of those "clients" who wished to invest their savings. However, Norbert paid no attention to the matter; he was too preoccupied in looking at *Mademoiselle Diane*, who had already placed her basket on her arm. "Before leaving you," she said, with considerable hesitation, "I should so much like—if I dared—to ask a favour—"

"A favour of me, *mademoiselle*?"

"You will oblige me," she resumed, "by saying nothing of this accident to any one. Should it reach the ears of my parents, they would be very anxious, and, undoubtedly, deprive me of the little liberty they now accord me."

"I will never mention this terrible misfortune, *mademoiselle*," he answered.

"Thanks, *marquis*," exclaimed Diane, with a coquettish courtesy.

"And another time, let me advise you, before you shoot, to ascertain that there's no one in the path!"

As she turned and departed, she limped no longer. Right lightly did her happy feet tread the earth. She had read Norbert's eyes like an open book; the game was in her hands. Women have a sixth sense which reveals to them things hidden from masculine perception. She had told Norbert in five careless sentences exactly what she wished him to know—that she was allowed some little liberty by her parents, and passed along that path almost every day. She was certain that the young *marquis* had not lost one word; and looking back, she saw him standing just as she had left him, as motionless as the trees around.

The poor boy felt, when Diane hurried off, as if she took with her all his

vitality. He had felt a strange, unaccountable pang as she tripped away. What did it mean? Had he been dreaming? And as if to satisfy himself that the adventure was a real one, he knelt down and searched for the shot that Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg had picked with her penknife from her leg. Having found it he rose, and, lost in reverie, slowly sauntered home. To his great surprise, when he entered the court-yard, he found the grand entrance open, and on the steps there stood his father, who impatiently exclaimed, "Make haste, lad, I want to present you to our guest!"

VI.

SINCE the death of Norbert's mother, the state rooms of the chateau had remained closed, but they were kept in such order, that they could be utilised at any moment. The dining-room was really magnificent, with its huge sideboards of carved oak incrustated with steel and garnished with plate bearing the Champdoce arms. Everything was on a grand scale. The walls were hung with tapestry, the seats were covered with old stamped leather, the table was so huge and heavy, that four men could barely raise it from the ground. When Norbert entered, he found himself face to face with a fat little, red-faced man, looking altogether common and vulgar, although his clothes were cut in the very best style. This was the Count de Puymandour, to whom M. de Champdoce at once introduced his son, by his title of marquis. Norbert was surprised, and wondered what this ceremonious presentation meant. However, his reflections were suddenly interrupted by the sonorous peals of the great bell, which had not been rung for fifteen years. At the same moment a valet entered the dining-room carrying a large silver soup tureen. The dinner of three, seated at so huge a table, and in so vast a room, would have been a little dreary, but for M. de Puymandour's fund of anecdote and adventure. He was continually to the fore with a fresh story, which he told in a jolly but vulgar tone, interspersed with hearty laughs. Whilst talking, however, he ate, and went into ecstasies over the wine, which the duke had brought up from the cellar, where he preserved a large supply intended for his descendants. M. de Champdoce, generally so silent and morose, smiled benignantly whilst the Count de Puymandour rattled on, and seemed indeed to greatly enjoy his guest's jokes. Norbert who knew his father, and had long studied him, was quite at a loss to understand his urbanity. Was it merely such as a host should show, was it sincere, or did it conceal an after-thought? He could not tell.

M. de Puymandour resided with his only daughter in a charming chateau of modern date, less than a league from Champdoce. He was most hospitably minded, and his receptions were truly magnificent; but whilst the neighbouring nobility condescended to dine at his table, they none the less called him a "robber" and a "rascal." He could not have been spoken of with greater contempt had he made his fortune by highway robbery. The fact is, he was wealthy; folks who pretended to be well informed, asserting that he possessed no less than five millions of francs. He had acquired them honestly and legitimately enough, by trading in wool on the Spanish frontier. His great, his only crime was, that his real name was Palouzat. On becoming wealthy, he had purchased the title of count from the Pope, had ordered a coat of arms from a herald's office in Paris, and had

endeavoured to convince the world that he was a born nobleman. With this object, indeed, he had left his native town, Orthez, to settle in Poitou, where the nobility tolerated him on account of his wealth, but without ever recognising his aristocratic pretensions. Still on this particular evening, he was greatly elated. It was no small honour to dine with the terrible Duke de Champdoce, and, indeed, M. de Puymandour considered it equivalent to a patent of social equality.

At ten o'clock, when the meal was over, and he talked of retiring, the duke insisted on escorting him as far as the high road; and Norbert, who walked a little in the rear, managed to catch a few words of the private conversation the pair were having together. "Yes," said De Puymandour, "I will give a round million. That's a sum, mind."

"Oh, I must have half as much again," rejoined M. de Champdoce.

"Half as much again!" was the retort, "no, that can never be managed. And, besides, remember the million I speak of will be in hard cash."

"Not enough, I say," rejoined the duke. "You'll come to my figure; I'm sure of it. It's your interest to do so."

Norbert was too absorbed in thoughts of Diane to pay much attention to this talk; but when M. de Puymandour had gone on his way the lad was roused from his reverie by his father exclaiming, "Did you note the bearing of that man, Norbert? He's a representative of our new aristocracy, and one of the best among them, too. Buffoon as he may be, he's still intelligent and honest. In another century the descendants of these folks will form a new nobility as greedy of prerogatives and influence as ours." During the walk home, M. de Champdoce enlarged on this subject; but Norbert, despite his seemingly attentive bearing, had again relapsed into the land of dreams. He fancied he could hear Diane's harmonious voice and merry laugh; he recalled all the circumstances of his melodramatic adventure that afternoon, and asked himself what impression he could have created on this young girl. Had he not made a fool of himself? Had he not behaved like a simpleton? Surely she would never take any notice of him.

However, he did not forget what she had said respecting her daily rambles in the same direction, and at the thought he might perhaps soon meet her again his blood tingled in his veins. He worshipped her already. Ah! if such a woman as she was only smiled upon him, his life would be changed indeed! He longed to see her, to tell her that he loved her: but realising that at the decisive moment his tongue would no doubt fail him, he thought it preferable to write. However, what could he say? He began fifty fresh letters that night and tore them up in succession. He feared that the plain, simple words, "I love you," would prove too startling and abrupt, and tried to express his feelings in milder terms. At last he considered he had composed a masterpiece, and threw himself on his bed, not to sleep, however, but to think and wait for morning. At early daybreak he had left the house, carrying his gun and followed by his faithful spaniel, and hurried to the spot where he had met Mademoiselle Diane the day before. Alas! he waited in vain. Hour after hour elapsed, and he strode up and down in feverish impatience, but she came not. He would have been much surprised had he been told that the young lady considered it not politic to show herself. And yet twice that day she ventured stealthily through the brushwood, watched him for several minutes, and then cautiously retired. On the morrow, after perceiving that Norbert was still

there waiting for her, she would perhaps again have gone on her way without giving sign of life, but for a fortuitous circumstance. Bruno, Norbert's dog, scented her, and darted to the corner of the highroad where she stood watching. There was then, of course, nothing for her to do but to come boldly on. Norbert had started up as soon as he heard his dog bark, and then, perceiving Diane, he had hastened forward to meet her. She coloured deeply, wondering if he had seen her hiding and watching him; and he, although her suspicions were incorrect, seemed equally, if not more embarrassed. For a moment they stood speechless, and with downcast eyes.

"If I dare to appear before you, mademoiselle," at last said Norbert in a husky voice, "it is because I have been devoured by anxiety to know how you were. How did you regain Sauvebourg, wounded as you were?" He paused, waiting for some word of encouragement, but none came. "I almost wished to go to the château to ask about you," he proceeded; "but you had forbidden me to speak of that unfortunate accident, and I could not disobey you."

"Many thanks," stammered Diane.

"Yesterday," continued Norbert, "I spent the whole day here. Will you forgive this folly? I thought that, perhaps, having noticed my anxiety, you would take pity on me, and condescend—" He stopped short, aghast at his own presumption; but Diane did not appear to be in the slightest degree appalled.

"Yesterday," she answered with an innocent air, "I was kept at home by my mother."

"For two days," resumed Norbert, "I have constantly thought I could see you lying senseless on the ground. I have felt as if I had committed a horrible crime. I cannot forget how white you were, and how I lifted your head and held it on my arm. It lay there but a moment, and yet I still seem to inhale the perfume of your hair."

"Oh, Monsieur le Marquis!" murmured Diane so softly that Norbert barely heard her.

"When you were here the other day," said he, "I was so entranced I could not express what I felt; but as soon as you had gone, it seemed as if everything grew dark." He quivered at the remembrance of the sensation he had experienced. "Then," said he, "I searched for the shot, which might have killed you, and at last I discovered it, and took it home with me. All the treasures of earth are nothing to me, compared with that holy relic!" Diane turned away her head to conceal the delight sparkling in her eyes. "Pardon me, mademoiselle," proceeded Norbert, "pardon me if I have offended you. You would pity me if you could form any idea of the life I have hitherto led. When I beheld you I hoped I had found a woman who might take some interest in my fate—a woman whose compassion could scarcely be repaid by life-long devotion." Norbert's eyes were aflame with passion as he spoke, and Diane involuntarily drew back. "Ah!" exclaimed the young marquis, wrongly interpreting her movement, "I see that I was mad—simply mad! And now I despair!"

"Ah, marquis! despair is not a word for us to use at our age," murmured Diane, who, cold and calculating as she usually was, was now profoundly touched by the young fellow's ardent manner.

The look which accompanied her words was significant enough to revive Norbert's hopes. "Do not trifle with me, mademoiselle," he said, "do not trifle with me; it would be too cruel."

As she hung her head without replying, he fell on his knees; and, snatch-

ing hold of her hands, covered them with kisses. Pale, and with compressed lips, Diane felt herself carried away by this whirlwind of passion. She panted for breath and fairly trembled. She found herself caught in the snare she had herself spread for Norbert, and it was only with a great effort that she succeeded in regaining some degree of self-possession. This situation must not be allowed to last. "I am forgetting my poor people!" she exclaimed.

"If I could only go with you, mademoiselle!"

"You may; but you will have to walk fast."

It often happens that a man's whole life is influenced by some apparently trivial circumstance. If on this particular day Diane had gone to see mother Besson, Norbert, who was with her, would have been put on his guard against Dauman. But it so chanced that she was bound on a visit to another of her *protégés*. Norbert watched her fulfil her charitable mission; and as he still had some of the money borrowed from Dauman about him, he laid a couple of gold pieces on the table before taking leave. He still walked beside Diane until they sighted the houses of Bivron, when she raised a finger to her lips, and, with the one word, "To-morrow!" turned into the path which led her home.

It was only then that Norbert regained in some measure his self-possession. Yes, he thought, this beautiful girl loved him; and, on his side, he was ready to shed his heart's blood for her. He tore up the letter he had written with so much trouble; for, in spite of his inexperience, he felt that Diane's promise to come the next day amounted to a confession of love.

Now, indeed, life seemed sweet and the future radiant; and Norbert was so unlike himself, so elated, that at supper the same evening the duke remarked, "*Jarnicoton*, lad! I'll wager a crown that you've had a good day's sport."

"You are right, father," answered Norbert audaciously. Fortunately enough, the duke did not ask to see his game-bag. But, on another occasion, he might be called upon to exhibit his spoils; and so, on the morrow, before going to meet Diane, he bought a couple of brace of partridges and a hare from a poacher he was acquainted with.

He had been waiting half an hour or so at the meeting-place, when Bruno's joyous barks warned him of Diane's approach. She was very pale, and the dark circles round her eyes testified to the anxiety which had kept her awake all night. As soon as she had left Norbert the day before, she had realised the risk she was running, and the extent of her imprudence. She was, so to say, trifling with her reputation, her future, in fact, with everything a young girl should hold most dear. For a moment she thought of consulting in her parents; but, on second thoughts, she rejected this salutary inspiration. "No," said she, "they would never understand me. My father would declare that the avaricious Duke de Champdore would never give his consent. I should not be allowed to leave the château, and, perhaps, I might be sent back to the convent." This last prospect was not at all to Diane's liking, and, besides, she fancied she had considerable chances of success. Hence she resolved to persevere with her scheme. She remained for some time talking with Norbert in the pathway, but suddenly remembering her poor, as on the previous day, she declared it was time to be off. She must not neglect her patients, or otherwise her parents might think of curtailing her liberty. Norbert again accompanied her on her visits, and even made so bold as to offer her his arm whenever the path proved slippery or steep.

This kind of thing went on for several days, the young lovers meeting every afternoon at the same spot and rambling along the lanes together. They were more than once met by peasants and farmers, and there are, of course, as scandalous tongues in Poitou as elsewhere. Diane realised all the imprudence of her conduct; but it was part of her plan to allow herself to be slightly compromised, though, at the same time, it must be understood that her behaviour, whilst in Norbert's company, was decorum itself. Unfortunately for their meetings, it was now the end of November, and cold weather was near at hand. One morning, when Norbert woke, he could see the rain falling in torrents, and hear a blustering wind careering through the trees. He said to himself that Diane would never be allowed to go out in such weather as that, and so he despondently installed himself in front of the fire at home, and tried, or pretended, to read.

Contrary to his surmises, however, Diane *had* gone out, but in one of her father's carriages, having to visit a poor old woman called widow Rouleau, who lived near Bivron, and who had broken her leg the previous week. On reaching the miserable shanty where the widow resided with her only daughter, Diane found them both in tears. "What fresh misfortune has befallen you?" she asked; whereupon the widow, with many sobs and groans, related that she owed a matter of a hundred and thirty crowns and could not possibly repay them, so that her creditor threatened to seize her two cows—her only belongings of any value—and have them sold. It was Dauman the "judge," she added, who had caused her all this trouble. She had begged him to grant her a little time, but he had refused her application, adding, however, that if her daughter went in person to appeal to him he might perhaps change his mind. The inference was plain enough, for Françoise Rouleau was a comely, buxom young woman. Diane was intensely shocked on hearing this. "How shameful," she cried; "I will go and see this man myself, and return here by-and-by." Thereupon, she hastily got into her carriage again, bade the coachman drive fast, and in ten minutes reached the "judge's" house.

Dauman was writing at his desk when the woman he dignified with the name of house-keeper showed Diane into his office. He started up, offered her a chair, and with his velvet cap in his hand, bowed to the very ground. Diane, although she knew little of Dauman's reputation, was not as artless as Norbert, and was not imposed upon by this display of servile deference. She waved away the chair with a disdainful gesture, and with haughty mien and in a curt, cold voice, exclaimed, "M. Dauman, I have just left the widow Rouleau."

"Ah! you know that poor woman?" observed the "judge," who had been wondering what on earth could have caused this proud young lady to call upon him.

"Yes, and am much interested in her."

"Oh! mademoiselle's compassion is well known," said the "judge" with a servile smile.

"Well, the poor woman is in great distress. She is confined to her bed with a broken limb, and is almost destitute."

"Yes; I heard of her accident."

"And yet folks have threatened to seize her two cows, which are all she owns in the world."

Dauman assumed a benevolent expression. "Poor creature!" said he. "I have often heard that misfortunes never come alone."

Diane was aghast at this cool impudence. "It seems to me," she answered, "that this last misfortune can only be attributed to you. At least so I am told."

"Can it be possible?"

"Well, who persecutes this poor widow, but you?"

"I?" cried the "judge," striking his breast with his clenched hand. "I? Ah! mademoiselle, why do you listen to these vipers' tongues? They only speak to slander me! The fact is, this woman bought two sacks of wheat and one of potatoes, from a man at Mussidan, on credit. A month later she bought three sheep from the same man, on credit as before. Then something else, I don't quite recollect what. However, all these things represent a certain sum."

"One hundred and thirty crowns, I believe."

"I daresay. At all events, she over and over again promised to pay without doing so, and finally the man became impatient. I believe he needed the money. Well, he came to me, and I talked to him of patience, but I might as well have talked to the wind. He declared that if I did not do as he desired, he would go elsewhere. What could I say? Besides he had the law on his side." Duman paused, and then *alto voce*, as if talking to himself, resumed, "If I could only find a way of getting the poor creature out of this trouble; but it would be impossible without money, and money, ay, there's the rub." So saying, he opened a drawer and displayed some fifty francs in silver which it contained. "This is all I have in the house," he said, mournfully, "and 'tisn't near enough." He then paused again, and then as if suddenly inspired, resumed, "Dear me, how stupid I am. With a noble young lady as her protector, widow Rouleau need have no fear of losing her cows." Unfortunately, Diane had no money; she had so enlarged her circle of benevolence that she had already anticipated on her allowance. "I will speak to my father," she said, in a tone that told very clearly that she had small hopes of success.

The "judge's" countenance fell. "To the Marquis de Sauvebourg?" he said. "Oh! in that case we haven't done with the matter." He will make all kinds of inquiries, and valuable time will be lost. If I dared advise you, I should say it would be better to apply to some family friend—to M. Norbert de Champdoco, for instance. I know," he continued, "that the duke doesn't keep his son's purse full of gold, but the young man need have no difficulty in obtaining anything he needs, for he will soon be of age, and besides a marriage may even more speedily place large sums at his disposal."

Diane fell into the trap so cunningly set for her. "A marriage?" said she, with mingled surprise and apprehension.

"Oh! I don't know. I say marriage as I might say legacy. With his father's consent he might of course marry to-morrow, but if he has a whim of his own he'll have to wait at least six years."

"Six years! Why he will be of age in fifteen months."

"What of that? To marry against his parents' will, a young man must be twenty-five, not merely twenty-one."

This blow was so unexpected that Diane lost her head. "Impossible!" she cried. "Are you not mistaken?"

The "judge" smiled triumphantly. "I am never mistaken!" he replied, as he calmly opened his codo and laid it before the young lady. While she read the passage he pointed out, he watched her as a cat watches a bird. "You see," said he, "at twenty-one M. Norbert will be an elector and his

own master in every respect, barring this one point of matrimony. The law is precise."

Diane was convinced, and now drew herself erect with a pale face and anxious eyes. "After all," she said, "what does it matter to me? I will speak to my father about widow Rouleau. Good-morning." Then making a great effort, she tottered out of the house.

When she was alone in the carriage again, she abandoned herself to a paroxysm of tears and despair. This fatal hampering provision of the law seemed to thwart all her plans. She had hitherto said to herself: "The Duke de Champdoce will never accept me as his daughter-in-law, with my poor little dowry; but as soon as Norbert is of age he can marry me, notwithstanding his father, and we shall not have much more than a year to wait." But now she saw six years of dreary suspense and struggling before her, and possibly a final defeat; for could Norbert's passion, fervid as it now was, live on hope alone for six long twelvemonths? The old Duke de Champdoce was as sturdy as an oak. He might last much longer. And yet despite this crushing blow, Diane determined to fight on. Resistance whetted her energy, and she swore she would do everything in her power to carry the day. To begin with, it was of the highest importance she should see Norbert as soon as possible. Alighting at the widow's door, she entered the house and hurriedly exclaimed, "I've seen the 'judge.' Don't distress yourself, everything will be arranged." And then cutting the poor old crone's thanks short, she added, "Can you give me a slip of white paper?"

Françoise, the daughter, produced a soiled scrap, and Diane wrote thereon, in pencil, as follows:—"She would, perhaps, have gone there in spite of the storm if she had not been occupied with the troubles of a poor woman. The same troubles will compel her, to-morrow, no matter what the weather may be, to go and see a man named Dauman, at his house at two o'clock." Diane folded up her note, and then exclaimed, "I want this to be delivered to M. Norbert de Champdoce: to himself, mind, and no one else."

It so happened that Françoise had made a blouse for one of the Champdoce farm servants, and thus, having an excuse for going to the château, she willingly undertook the errand, albeit, Diane's conduct seemed to her passing strange.

It rained hard again the next day, but at two p.m. Norbert, punctually, arrived at Dauman's house. He had an excuse all ready for his visit, for he had exhausted the funds of his first loan and needed more money. He had no idea why Diane had selected the "judge's" abode for their meeting place, but he was inexpressibly downcast. He had thought of marrying Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg. As ignorant as herself of the law, he had fancied he might do so on attaining his twenty-first year; but, alas! he dared not confide his projects to his father, for the latter, in revealing his scheme for the restoration of the family fortunes, had added: "You must marry a woman of wealth." However, Norbert felt he could never carry self-sacrifice so far, never abandon Diane, and he was on the point of unburdening himself to Dauman, asking his advice and help, when a vehicle stopped outside, and a moment later Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg entered the room. At one glance Dauman realised the position, and cut short all pretended astonishment on the part of the young people by hastily explaining to Diane what he had done in regard to the Rouleau matter. "The *huissier*," he said, "consents to delay proceedings—I can even show you his letter to that effect." He turned and looked for this letter among his papers, with as much perseverance as if it had really existed. "I can't find it," he

eventually exclaimed; "I must have left it in my bed-room. I have so much to do," he added, testily, "that sometimes I lose my head. I must find it, however. Excuse me, I will be back directly."

In point of fact the worthy "judge" was by no means anxious about this huissier's letter; only he had divined a rendezvous and considered he might best ascertain its purport by leaving the room. He went, however, no farther than the other side of the door, and then in turn applying eye and ear to the keyhole, he heard and saw all that he desired. The "judge's" absence seemed to Norbert a celestial boon. He had been painfully struck by Diane's pale face as soon as he saw her, and now he took her hands and looked into her very eyes. "Tell me," he said in a low, tender voice, "what has happened to you?" A sigh came from Diane, and then two pearly tears rolled down her cheeks. "In heaven's name," cried Norbert, "what has caused your grief? Diane, I implore you to tell me! Am I not your truest and most devoted friend?"

For a long time she refrained from giving any precise answer, and it was only after Norbert in utter despair had again and again renewed his prayers, that she finally declared that on the previous evening her father had spoken to her of a young man who had asked for her hand—a young man with every advantage of birth, character and fortune. Norbert listened, quivering from head to foot with jealousy. "And you did not refuse?" he asked.

She gave an evasive reply, asking; "What could a poor young girl do against her family, when she had only two alternatives offered to her—either a marriage she loathed, or a convent she dreaded."

With his ear close to the door, Dauman shook with laughter. "Not bad!" he muttered—"not at all bad for a little convent-bred girl. She has a clear head and a clever tongue, and under my tuition she would go the whole hog or none. If this simpleton doesn't declare himself now, I wonder what'll be her next move?"

"And you could hesitate?" resumed Norbert, reproachfully. "There would always be a chance of escape from a convent, but a marriage—"

Diane, looking more lovely than ever in her tears, wrung her hands piteously. "What reasons," she asked, "could she give her father for her refusal? Did not every one know she was virtually dowryless—sacrificed to her brother. Who but this man would ever ask for her hand?"

"Do you forget me?" cried Norbert. "You do not love me, then—"

"Alas! my friend, you are not free either."

"I am only a weak child, it seems?" he asked, with compressed lips.

"Your father is all-powerful," she replied, resignedly. "His will is inflexible, and you are in his power."

"What do I care for my father?" he exclaimed. "Am I not a Champ-douce as well as he? Woe to the man, father or not, who comes between me and the woman I adore. For I adore you, Diane, and no human being shall take you from me." With these words, he clasped her to his breast, and pressed a burning kiss on her brow.

Dauman, at the key-hole, held his breath for a moment. "This sight," he muttered at last, "is worth at least fifty thousand francs to me."

Panting like a bird in its captor's hands Diane seemed for a moment terrified, but with a sudden effort she repelled Norbert, and escaped from his arms. She was a woman, be it remembered, young and passionate, despite all her diplomatic artfulness, and she felt afraid—afraid of him, afraid of herself.

"Do you refuse me, then?" he asked. "Do you really repel me when I implore you to be my wife—to become the Duchess de Champloce?" Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg answered with one look, which said as clearly as eyes can speak: "I am your's, I belong to you."

"Then, why frighten ourselves with these vain chimcras?" resumed Norbert. "Do you doubt my love? May be my father will oppose these plans which assure the happiness of my life. But before long I shall have shaken off his tyranny. In a few months' time I shall be of age."

"Alas! my friend," she answered, "your's are vain delusions. You must be twenty-five before you can give your name, unhindered, to the woman you love."

This was precisely the disclosure Dauman had been waiting for. "Bravo! he muttered, "bravo! young lady. So that's why she came. Well, there's some pleasure in giving her a lesson, for she doesn't forget a word of it."

"You are mistaken," Norbert had answered in reply to Diane's statement.

"Unfortunately, I tell you the precise truth, my friend. The law clearly defines the age I speak of—twenty-five. You will enjoy Paris, Norbert, from twenty-one to twenty-five, and will you remember that a sad-hearted girl—"

"Why do you talk to me of law? I shall have plenty of money when I'm twenty-one; and do you think I shall submit to my father's coercion? Not so, indeed I will wring his consent from him!"

The "judge" now thought it time to intervene. "I shall suddenly open the door," he said to himself, "accidentally hear a few words, make some remark upon them, and master the situation."

Norbert and Diane had so utterly forgotten Dauman's existence, that they started with alarm as he re-entered the room. But he was in no way disconcerted by the effect he produced. In the easiest possible tone, he exclaimed: "I can't find the letter; but I assure you that the widow's affair shall be speedily and satisfactorily arranged. I wish I could say as much of your own concerns."

Norbert and Diane exchanged a look, which testified to the anxiety they felt on finding themselves at this man's discretion. Their evident fear seemed to mortify Dauman most cruelly. "You have a perfect right," he exclaimed, "to tell me to mind my own business, but the truth is, injustice revolts me to such a degree that I invariably side with the weakest. The few words I overheard just now, as I came in, were a ray of light to me, and I said to myself, 'Here are two young people made for each other—'"

"Sir!" interrupted Diane, haughtily, "you forget yourself."

"I beg your pardon," stammered the "judge," "I am only a poor peasant; I speak too plainly. I meant no harm, and I trust you will forgive me." Then as Diane made no further objection, he resumed: "Well, I said to myself, here are two young people who love each other, and have a right to love each other, and yet they are kept apart by unreasonable, hard-hearted parents. Young and ignorant, knowing nothing of the law, they would certainly get into trouble if left to their own devices. But suppose I helped them, and no doubt I might do so advantageously, for I know the law thoroughly—I know its weak points and its strong ones—" He talked on sounding his own praises for fully ten minutes, and affected not to see that the young couple were whispering to each other near the window.

"Why not trust him?" said Norbert; "he has had experience."

"He will betray us; he is capable of anything for money."

"So much the better for us, then. He will hold his tongue if he is promised a magnificent reward."

"Do as you think best, my friend."

Thus encouraged, Norbert turned to Dauman. "I have perfect confidence in you," he said, "and so has this young lady. You know the situation. What is your advice?"

"Simply this," answered the "judge." "Learn to wait. The least step taken before your majority is fatal; but the day after you are twenty-one, I promise to show you more ways than one of bringing the duke down on his narrow-bones."

He could not be induced to speak more plainly, but he looked so confident and cheerful, that when Diane left the office she felt hopeful once more.

This was almost their last interview that year. The weather turned from bad to worse, so that it was impossible for them to meet out of doors, and the fear of being watched prevented them from availing themselves of Dauman's hospitality. Each day, however, the widow Ronleau's daughter carried a letter to Sauvebourg and brought back a reply to Champdoce. The cold weather had scattered the inhabitants of the various châteaux of the district. Only the Marquis de Sauvebourg, who was a great sportsman, lingered behind; but after some heavy snow storms even he decided to retire until the ensuing spring to the handsome mansion he owned at Poitiers. Norbert and Diane had foreseen this contingency, and acted accordingly. Two or three times each week Norbert mounted his horse and rode to town, changed his clothes and hurried to a certain garden wall where he walked up and down before a small door. At a certain hour, previously agreed upon, this door softly opened. Norbert slipped in, and there in the garden found Diane, lovelier than ever. This great passion, the beacon of his life, and the certainty of being loved, had dispelled much of his timidity. He had met Montlouis again, and often played a game of dominoes with him at the Café Castile. Montlouis was to join the young Viscount de Mussidan in Paris, and become his secretary as soon as the winter was over; but this prospect, which had once so delighted him, was now scarcely to his taste, for, as he confessed to Norbert, he feared separation from a young girl in the vicinity whom he was desperately in love with. Confidence for confidence; and more than once Montlouis went with Norbert to the door that opened into the Marquis de Sauvebourg's garden.

April at last came round again. The châteaux refilled, and the lovers were able to meet in the lanes once more. They had now only a few mouths to wait until Norbert reached his majority, when Dauman had promised to help them. One day, however, when they had spent the afternoon in the woods together, preaching patience to each other, and just as Norbert, light-hearted and full of spirits, had reached home, his father sent for him.

"Marquis," said the duke, without the least preamble, "I have found you a wife, and you will marry her in two months from now."

VII.

A THUNDER clap would have terrified Norbert less than these words. But the duke did not see, or did not choose to see, his son's agitation, and simply added, in a composed, careless tone: "There is no need, I imagine, to tell you the young lady's name. She is, of course, Mademoiselle de Puymandour."

She cannot fail to please you. As you know yourself, for you have seen her, she is very pretty, tall and dark, with a very pleasing figure. Her teeth, eyes, and hair are admirable. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," stammered Norbert. "I think—in fact I've scarcely even noticed her."

"Pshaw!" rejoined the old nobleman, "I thought you were learning to use your eyes. Never mind, you will have ample time to look at your wife when you are married. And, *marquis*, there must be some alteration in your dress. To-morrow you will go with me to Poitiers and give orders to a tailor, who will see you are dressed as befits your rank. We mustn't frighten this young lady with our fustian jackets."

"But—"

"Wait a moment, if you please. I shall set aside some of the rooms in the château, and you will spend your honeymoon here. You will take care it doesn't last too long, and, after a while, we can introduce this young woman to our ways, make a frugal, economical housewife of her."

"But, father," said Norbert, hastily, "suppose I don't fancy this young lady?"

"Well?"

"Suppose I entreated you to spare me a marriage which would make me miserable?"

M. de Champdocé shrugged his shoulders. "This is childish," he said.

"This alliance is in every way suitable, and I wish it—"

"But, father—" Norbert began again.

"Do you hesitate?" asked the duke angrily.

"No; I don't hesitate," said his son boldly.

"Very well, then. Let a mere nobody consult the dictates of his heart, if he sees fit, when he marries, but with a man of position, matrimony should be looked upon as a matter of business. I have managed things admirably. The marriage portion will be a million and a half of francs in hard cash, and ultimately, when Puymandour dies, and he's apoplectic mind, you'll come into the remainder of his fortune. Do you know what he's worth: Five millions. Think of that! And this is all the more reason for pinching and economising. Think of the restoration of our house, of the princely fortune of our descendants, and realise the beauty of self-abnegation." The duke walked for some minutes up and down the room, speaking incoherently, and at last stopped in front of his son. "You understand everything now," he said. "To-morrow you will go to Poitiers, and on Sunday we dine with the Puymandours."

Norbert hardly knew what to say or do in this extremity. "Father," he began once more, "I don't see the use of going to Poitiers to-morrow."

"What do you say? What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean," answered the young man with sudden energy, "that I shall never love Mademoiselle de Puymandour, and that she will never be my wife."

The duke had not once foreseen this contingency, and his mind refused to believe the possibility of such monstrous iniquity. "You are mad!" he exclaimed, "and you don't know what you say or what you want!"

"I know very well."

"Reflect, my son."

"I have reflected."

M. de Champdocé was evidently struggling to keep calm. "And you think," he said, with a disdainful smile, "that I shall be satisfied with such an answer as this?"

"I hope you will yield to my entreaties."

"Do you, indeed? You think that I, the head of this family, after conceiving a magnificent plan for the restoration of its fortunes, am to be turned from my scheme by the mere caprice of a boy like yourself! Surely you ought to know me better!"

"No, father," rejoined Norbert, "it is no mere whim that impels me to refuse and claim independence. Have I not always been a good son? Have I ever disobeyed you? You have said, 'Go there,' and I have gone, 'Come here,' and I have obeyed you. I am the son of the wealthiest man in the province, and I have lived like the son of your poorest farm-hand. Have I complained or murmured? Bid me do whatever you choose except—"

"I bid you marry Mademoiselle de Putmandour!" said the duke, striking the floor with the stout ash stick he carried, according to his wont.

"Oh! all but that. I don't love her, I cannot love her. Do you wish me to be utterly miserable for the rest of my life? Do not exact that of me!"

"I have spoken, and you will have to obey."

"No," said Norbert quietly. "I will not obey!"

On hearing this the duke at first turned purple, and then every drop of blood seemed to leave his face, which became absolutely livid. "*Jarnieu!*" he cried in a voice that once would have made Norbert tremble. "How do you dare to brave me in this way? What on earth has given you this audacity?"

"The consciousness of being in the right."

"How long has it been right for children to disobey their parents?"

"Ever since fathers ventured to give unjust orders."

This was more than the Duke de Champdoce could endure. "*Jarnieu!*" he cried; and he rushed towards his son with his bludgeon raised, but suddenly stopping short when only midway, he threw the stick across the room, and in a hoarse voice exclaimed—"No! I will not strike a Champdoce!"

Maybe it was Norbert's fearless attitude that restrained his father's passionate fury. This once timid youth had not moved, not even sought to avoid the onslaught, but stood quite still and erect, with folded arms and head thrown back. And even now that the duke had flung his improvised weapon aside, Norbert retained the same attitude of defiance, thus speedily rekindling his father's anger. "I will not submit to such audacity," cried M. de Champdoce, and seizing his son by the collar, he dragged him to one of the rooms on the second floor, and roughly pushed him inside. Then before retiring and locking the door he exclaimed, "You shall have twenty-four hours to decide whether you will accept the wife I have selected for you."

"My decision is made," answered Norbert, calmly. He had not resisted his father, when the latter dragged him upstairs. Semi-prostration had followed his sudden courage, and yet it was urgent he should act, urgent he should warn Diane of what had happened and put her on her guard against all contingencies. But how could he escape? The door was of solid oak, more than an inch thick, and the lock was as enormous in strength as in size. Only the window remained; and this was forty feet from the ground. But Norbert reflected that some one would probably be sent to make up a bed for him, and then he would have two sheets at his disposal. These he could knot together, and thus obtain the means of descent. If he

started off at night-time, with the intention of returning before dawn, he could not of course see Diane, but he might send her a warning through Dauman, whom it was also urgent he should see, with the view of obtaining proper advice. This plan decided upon, he threw himself into one of the arm-chairs in the room with a lighter heart than he had known for months, for the ice was now broken between his father and himself, and this seemed a very great point to Norbert. The first step was taken, and it is always the first one that is the most difficult. The rest would be easier work, and at all events he must conquer at any price.

In the meanwhile, downstairs, the duke was wild with rage. When he took his seat at the supper table, he looked so terrible that the farm-hands barely dared open their mouths to eat and drink. They all knew that a violent quarrel had taken place between M. de Champdoce and his son, and wondered what could have occasioned it. The meal was soon over, and the duke then summoned an old confidential servant, who had been in his employment for thirty years. "Jean," he said, "your young master is shut up in the yellow room on the second floor. There's the key; take him something to eat."

"Yes, sir,"

"Wait a moment. You will pass the night in his room. Whether he sleeps or not, you will watch him just the same. It may be he will think of running away. If it be necessary to employ force, employ it; that's all. If you are not strong enough, just call to me; I shall hear and come to your assistance."

This unexpected precaution destroyed all Norbert's hopes. He tried to induce his jailer to let him out for a couple of hours, swearing he would faithfully return, but his prayers were as vain as the threats to which he next resorted. Had he looked from the window, he would have seen his father pacing up and down the court-yard, absorbed in the dreary thought that perhaps, after all these long years, he was doomed to disappointment. "There is a woman concerned in it," the duke reflected. "Only a woman could change a young man's character from white to black in so short a time, and besides he would never have declined this proposal with such obstinacy if he had not been in love with some one else!" But who could this woman be? What steps could be taken to discover her? It would, of course, be useless to question Norbert himself, and at the same time the duke was very unwilling to institute any formal inquiry. He passed the greater part of the night in painful indecision as to the best course to pursue, when all at once he had an inspiration, which he regarded as direct from Heaven. "I have Bruno!" he cried. "And through this dog I can learn all my son's habits, discover what houses he goes to when he's out alone, and even ascertain the very woman under whose influence he acts!" Somewhat comforted by this hope, M. de Champdoce was more like himself when he appeared in the morning. At noon he took his seat at the table as usual, and ordered the prisoner's dinner to be carried upstairs, with no relaxation of watchfulness.

At last the moment he deemed favourable arrived. He whistled to Bruno, who seldom followed him, but in Norbert's absence the animal yielded to entreaties and condescended to accompany the duke as far as the end of the avenue. Three diverging roads started from this point, but Bruno did not hesitate, he turned to the left one, with the air of a dog who knows perfectly well where he is going. On he went for more than half an hour, the duke following him all afire with hope and expectation,

and at last the pair reached the woodland path where Diane and Norbert had so often met. Sagacious Bruno halted at the precise spot where the young marquis had wounded Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg, ran round in a circle, sniffed in all the neighbouring bushes, and finding nothing, quietly lay down. His intelligent eyes seemed to say, "Let us wait!"

"This," thought the duke, "is evidently the spot where the lovers have been in the habit of meeting." Anxious to watch and escape observation, he next retreated into the neighbouring grove and sat down on a mossy stone at the foot of an oak. He was so pleased with his penetration respecting Bruno's abilities, that he was almost in a good humour. Moreover, on reflection, the danger seemed to him far less than he had feared. To whom could Norbert have lost his heart? What ambitious little country girl, thinking the youth simple enough to be duped, had made up her mind to marry him? The duke was thus reflecting when he heard the dog bark joyously. "Here she comes then!" he said, and he rose to his feet at once. At the same moment Diane appeared, and perceiving M. de Champdoce was unable to restrain a little shriek of terror. She hesitated, should she turn and run? But strength failed her to do so, and only just in time to avert a swoon did she grasp the nearest birch for support. The old nobleman was quite as much dismayed as she. He had expected a country girl, and he saw the daughter of the Marquis de Sauvebourg before him.

But his anger quite equalled his surprise. If he had nothing to dread from a peasant's daughter, he had everything to fear from this young lady of noble birth, who was legitimately entitled to try and win Norbert for her husband. Could he even have recourse to her family? Perhaps she was acting at her parents' instigation. He was sorely perplexed, and yet an explanation was necessary. "Aha!" he began, with a grinace intended for a smile, "you don't look overpleased to see me, my child!"

"Sir!"

"I understand. When one comes to meet the son and finds the father, the change is not altogether satisfactory. But you mustn't blame Norbert; for, poor boy, I assure you that it isn't his fault!"

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg was no ordinary girl. Startled at first, she had by this time regained her self-possession. Some women would have taken refuge in denial; but this idea never occurred to her. A disavowal of her position would have been an act of absolute baseness in her eyes. "You are right, Monsieur le Duc," she answered; "it was to meet your son, the marquis, that I came. You will therefore excuse me if I retire."

She made a sweeping courtesy with charming grace, and was about to pass on, when the duke laid his hand on her arm. "My child, allow me to say a few words to you;" and he tried to speak in a paternal fashion.

"Do you know why Norbert is not here?"

"I presume he has some excellent reason."

"My son is a prisoner in his room, guarded by my servants, who are ordered to restrain him by force if he makes any attempt to escape."

"Indeed! Poor fellow! How I pity him!"

The duke was amazed at this effrontery, as he called it in his heart. "I wish to tell you," he retorted, in an angry voice, "why I treat my only son, the heir of my name and fortune, in this manner."

His eyes flashed fire, but Diane quietly answered, "Pray proceed, Monsieur le Duc."

"Well then, I beg leave to inform you that I've found a wife for Norbert. She is about your own age, beautiful, clever, witty, and wealthy."

"And of high birth, of course?"

This sarcasm stung the old nobleman. "Fifteen hundred thousand francs as a dowry," he sternly replied, "are worth more than a tower argent on an azure field." This was the Sauvebourg blazon, and the duke paused as if to underline his uncourteous retort. "I will tell you," he at length resumed, "that the young lady in question has several millions coming to her, and yet my son is mad enough to refuse her hand. But I will not tolerate such disobedience."

"You are right, sir, I am sure, if you really think this marriage would ensure your son's happiness."

"His happiness! What does that matter if the supremacy of our house is insured by it? I have determined that Norbert shall marry this woman—and marry her he shall. I have sworn it, and I swear it again!"

Diane's agony of mind was well-nigh intolerable, but her pride sustained her; and, moreover, feeling sure of Norbert, she ventured to ask, "And what does Monsieur le Marquis say?"

"Norbert," angrily replied the duke, "will return to his duty as soon as it pleases me to free him from the pernicious influence he has been subjected to."

"Ah! indeed!"

"He will obey me when I show him that, though he may be in ignorance of the prestige of his fortune and his name, there are others who fully understand it. I can understand a woman longing to be Duchess de Champdoce! However, my son may be a mere child; but I have had some small experience of the world, and when I enlighten him as to the ambition which he, poor fool, mistook for love and unselfish devotion, he will return to his allegiance to me. I will tell him how to look on those haughty, high-born damsels, who, both penniless and proud, have merely their youth and beauty to win husbands with—scheming girls who, in pursuit of phantom dreams, are willing to run risks and perils which eventually leave them with tarnished reputations."

"Continue, Monsieur le Duc!" cried Diane, turning pale with anger and emotion. "Continue, pray; insult a defenceless girl—laugh at her poverty—it is a generous, noble thing to do, right worthy of a gentleman!"

"I thought," said M. de Champdoce, "that I was addressing the person whose influence had induced my son to rebel against my authority. Am I mistaken? You can prove me to be in the wrong by inducing Norbert to submit." Diane did not speak, but dropped her head. "You see," resumed the duke, more angrily than before, "I am right. Reflect well on what I say, and remember that persistency on your part will justify any reprisals on mine. You are warned—continue your intrigue if you dare!"

This word, "intrigue," spoken with an insulting sneer, was too much for Diane. She would have sacrificed at that moment her honour, ambition, and very life for the sake of revenge. Forgetting all prudence, she cast aside the mask, and haughtily throwing back her head, with her eyes flashing fire, and her cheeks blazing: "Listen to me!" she cried. "I, too, have sworn—and I have sworn that Norbert shall be my husband! Imprison him, have him guarded and ill-treated by your servants if you like, but you will never draw from him a shadow of assent. He will resist because I bid him resist—even unto death, if need must be. His energy, like mine, will never abate; and, believe me, before attacking the honour

of a young girl, remember that she will one day become a member of your own family. Farewell !”

Diane was far down the path before the duke recovered his senses, and then he burst forth into a torrent of imprecations, threats, and insults. He believed himself alone, but never was he more mistaken. This strange scene had an invisible witness—none other than “judge” Dauman in person.

Informed by one of the servants at the château of the young marquis’s imprisonment, Dauman had been eager to warn Diane ; but how was he to do so ? He could not go to Sauvebourg, and no power on earth would have induced him to write a line ; for handwriting is treacherous, and may turn up as evidence against one, even when least expected. The “judge” was thus greatly embarrassed, when it occurred to him he might repair to the lovers’ usual meeting-place, whither Diane would come that afternoon no doubt. He was barely a few yards off, when he heard her cry of alarm on perceiving M. de Champdocé. This cry put him on his guard ; he crept and crawled to a hiding-place, where he could both see and listen. Bruno soon scented him out ; but he was known by the dog, who complacently allowed the “judge” to pat his head and fondle him. How eagerly Dauman listened to the talk between M. de Champdocé and Diane can easily be imagined. But he realised that Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg, despite her haughty bearing, was really sorely perplexed, and anticipated that, before returning home, she would hasten to his house to ask his advice. “If I am to carry out my plans,” he said to himself, “I ought to strike the iron while it’s hot : and how can I do that, if I am not at home to receive her ?”

Accordingly, without any especial caution, he rose from his hiding-place and hastened through the woods, hoping, by means of a short cut, to reach his house before Diane arrived there. The noise occasioned by his passage through the underbrush attracted the duke’s attention. “Who’s there ?” he cried, going towards the spot whence the sound had proceeded. No reply. Still he had certainly heard someone or something stir. Summoning Bruno, he tried to put him on the scent ; but the dog merely sniffed about a little, and then lingered near the bush behind which Dauman had remained concealed. The duke eagerly scanned the ground, and at last distinctly detected the imprint of two knees on the velvety moss. “Some one has been listening,” he said to himself, disagreeably impressed by this circumstance. “But who can it have been ? Has Norbert escaped from his room ?” This idea so alarmed him that he strode home in hot haste. “Where is my son ?” he asked of the first servant he perceived.

“Up-stairs, sir,” was the reply.

M. de Champdocé breathed again. Norbert had not escaped, and therefore it was not he who had been listening.

“Our young master’s in a terrible state, sir,” added the servant whom the duke had questioned.

“What do you mean ?”

“Well, sir, he declared he wouldn’t stay in that room a minute longer, and so Jean called for assistance. He’s frightfully strong, sir, for it took six of us to hold him. He swore that if we would let him out, he would be back in two hours, and said it was a matter in which his honour and life were involved.”

The old nobleman heard this account with a sarcastic smile. What did he care for the young fellow’s struggles ! His grace’s heart had grown hard under the pressure of fixed ideas during so many years. It was with the

solemn air of a man who believes he is fulfilling a sacred duty, that he climbed the stairs and knocked at the door of the room where his son was confined. Jean, the confidential servant, at once opened it, and for a minute the duke stood on the threshold. All the furniture had been overturned, and a great deal of it broken, the fragments strewn the floor. A stalwart farm-hand was seated by the window, and Norbert lay on the bed with his face turned to the wall.

"Leave us," at last said the duke to the servants, who instantly withdrew; whereupon M. de Champdoce added, "Get up, Norbert; I wish to speak to you."

The young fellow obeyed. Anyone but M. de Champdoce would have been startled by the wild, haggard expression of his face. "What does this mean?" asked his father, in his most arbitrary voice. "Are not my orders sufficient to insure obedience? It seems it was necessary to employ brute force during my absence. Tell me, my son, what you have gained by these hours of solitude? What plans have you formed, and what hopes?"

"I wish, and I intend to be free."

M. de Champdoce preferred not to heed this clear, decisive answer. "It was easy for me to divine," he continued, "from your obstinate resistance, that some woman had taken advantage of your inexperience, and employed her pernicious influence in inducing you to disobey your best friend." He hesitated. No answer came. "Well, I went in search of this woman who was flattering your pride and ministering to your worst passions, and, as you may imagine, I found her. I went to the Bois de Bivron, and there, I need scarcely tell you, I met Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg."

"And—did you speak to her?"

"Did I speak to her? I am inclined to believe I did. I told her what I thought of those adventuresses who fascinate the dupes they mean to take advantage of."

"Father!"

"Can it be possible, poor, simple boy, that you have been taken in by that young lady's pretended love. It is not you, marquis, she wants, but our fortune, title, and name. However, there are places where women who lead young men astray can be shut up, and I told her so."

Norbert turned perfectly white. "And you said that to her?" he asked, in a low, hoarse tone. "You dared to insult the woman I love, while you knew I could not protect her? Take care—I shall forget you are my father."

"*Jurillonnerre!* He threatens me!" roared the duke. "My son threatens me!" And mad with rage, blinded by the blood that rushed to his brain, he raised his heavy stick and struck at Norbert.

Fortunately, the young fellow instinctively recoiled, so that only the extreme end of the staff hit him just above the temple, and then slipped, severely grazing his cheek. Norbert, in his turn infuriated, was about to rush upon his father, when he suddenly saw that the door was open. This meant liberty and salvation. With one bound he reached the stairs, and before the duke could throw up the window and call for help, the young fellow was running like a madman across the meadows.

VIII.

DAUMAN had hoped to take a short cut home, but his road proved longer than the one followed by Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg. However, he scrambled through the trees and hastened down the paths with wonderful agility and speed, as if he had never been troubled with rheumatism, and at last reaching his house, he darted without even drawing breath up to the garret, and from an artfully concealed hole in one of the rafters, drew forth a tiny black phial which he slipped into his pocket. Then going downstairs into his office he examined the phial with a sinister smile, and after ascertaining that there had been no tampering with its contents, he laid it on his table behind a pile of papers. Next, he wiped his brow, and donned his velvet smoking cap and shabby dressing-gown. Mademoiselle Diane might come now as soon as she pleased: he was quite ready for her. And why on earth did she not come? Had any other adventure befallen her? Dauman began to be anxious. He went to the window, and looked down the road; he consulted his watch and swore impatiently, when, all at once, he heard a light tap at the door. "Come in," he cried.

Diane entered, indeed, tottered into the room, and sank on to a chair heedless of the "judge's" courteous welcome. He now understood why she had been so long in coming; her strength had failed her—prostration and nervous emotion had followed anger and energy. But after a minute's repose, she made a vigorous effort, and regaining in some measure her self-possession, exclaimed, "'Judge,' I need advice. Listen to me. About an hour ago—"

With a gesture Dauman interrupted her. "Alas!" he sighed, "I know everything!"

"You knew—"

"That Monsieur Norbert is a prisoner? Yes, mademoiselle, I know that. And I also know that you have just met M. de Champdoo in the Bois de Bivron. I know, moreover, all you said to the duke. I have heard every word from a person who has just left me."

Diane was unable to repress a start of terror and dismay. "Who told you this?" she gasped.

"A wood-cutter. Ah! mademoiselle, woods are not safe places to tell secrets in. Behind every tree a pair of ears may be listening. Four wood-cutters heard every syllable you both said. As soon as you left the duke, they started off eager to tell their tale. I did my best to make the one I saw promise not to repeat it. He promised, of course, but then he's married, and will, naturally, tell everything to his wife. And then there are the three others, besides."

"Then I am lost!" murmured Diane, despondently, regretting for the moment, perhaps, that she had so trifled with her reputation. Dauman hung his head by way of answer. But this daughter of the once martial house of Sauvebourg was not the woman to abandon the fight so long as life was left her. "All is not over yet," she cried, grasping the "judge's" arm. "What ~~ex~~ we to do? You must have some idea. I am ready for anything, ~~now~~ that I have nothing to lose. No, it shall never be said that the Duke de Champdoo insulted me, the coward? without my having my revenge. Will you help me?"

"For Heaven's sake!" said Dauman, "speak lower! Be calm, I implore you. You do not know this man, I assure you."

"You are afraid of him then, are you?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, I am afraid, and very much afraid. What a man he is! He almost always gains his ends at any cost. Do you know that he tried to injure me, to punish me, for having summoned him before a magistrate in the name of one of my clients? And so, when anyone comes to me with anything against the duke, I am apt to keep out of the business—"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Diane, contemptuously. "Then after inducing us to compromise ourselves, you now abandon us in this emergency."

"Oh, mademoiselle, can you believe—"

"Do as you please, 'judge.' Norbert is still left to me."

Dauman shook his head, sadly. "How can we be sure that at this very moment the marquis has not said Amen! to all his father's propositions?"

"No!" cried Diane, "I don't believe that of Norbert. He would kill himself first! He is timid, I know, but not a coward; and when he thinks of me he will have strength to resist."

"Oh we can reason coldly," retorted Dauman, "for we stand here free and in safety. M. Norbert, on the contrary, is exposed to all sorts of threats and dangers, moral and physical tortures. He is in the power of one of the most obstinately wicked men that ever lived. And, remember, there are moments in men's lives when even the firmest natures waver."

"Well, I admit it. I admit that Norbert may have abandoned me, that he will marry another woman, and that I am lost and dishonoured, destined to become the talk of the whole province. Nevertheless, I have still life left to me, and that life I would gladly give in exchange for revenge."

"There was a ring of such terrible vehemence in her voice, that Dauman started; and this time his start was a real, not an affected one. "Ah me!" he said, "I also swore to have my revenge on the duke; but then he's so powerful, so dangerous an adversary, that I thought better of it. And there are many others who have done the same, men who threatened vengeance with frightful oaths, calling heaven and hell to witness them. 'A good shot in the twilight from behind a hedge would finish him,' they thought. Well, they loaded their guns and went forth to wait and watch; but, dear me, at the last moment their hearts failed them, and the duke lives on, as hale and hearty as ever. And yet, it seems to me, that judges don't look deeply enough into things. What looks to them like a crime is often a deliverance. Who can tell how many other crimes the Duke de Champdoce's death would avert, or how many people it would render happy?" Diane turned pale as she listened to these words. "Meanwhile," continued Dauman, "as I said before, the duke lives on. He is rich and powerful, and to a certain degree respected. He will die in his bed, there will be a great crowd at his funeral, and the curé will, of course, pray for him, as in duty bound." Whilst speaking, the "judge" had drawn the tiny black glass phial from behind his papers, and turned it round and round in his hands. "Yes," he repeated, "M. de Champdoce, the sturdy old veteran, will bury us all, unless—" He stopped short, uncorked the phial, and dropped a few particles of the fine white sparkling dust it contained into the palm of his hand. "And yet," he said, in a low, stern voice, "a little of this powder and no one would ever need fear the terrible duke again. For a man who lies six feet under ground, with a heavy stone and a fine epitaph over him, doesn't inspire anybody with dread."

He ceased speaking, and watched the girl before him. They stood face to face, motionless and breathless, for two good minutes. The silence was so profound that the very beating of their hearts might have been heard. They each wished to ascertain, before breaking this intense silence, whether they both shared the same criminal thought. Yes, they understood each other, for Dauman at last spoke, in a hoarse whisper, as if he feared the very sound of his own voice. "There is no pain with this— Imagine a man struck by a heavy blow on the temple. Ten seconds, and all is over. Not a cry, nor a gasp, nor a struggle—nothing—"

"Nothing?"

"And no traces either. One pinch dropped in wine or coffee would suffice. Nothing betrays its presence, no change of colour in the liquid, no smell, no taste."

"But if a very careful post mortem examination took place, might not some traces be detected?"

"Perhaps so, in Paris, or some large town—but not here in the depths of the provinces. And besides, never unless suspicion had been previously aroused. There are perhaps not four doctors in France who would remark ought else but the symptoms of apoplexy; moreover, it is not enough to say it's there, it must be found. Then comes the question, how it got there."

"Yes, perhaps—"

"There is no perhaps. Investigations once begun would be carried to the end. However, this substance is not sold by chemists. It is rare, costly and difficult to prepare and obtain. At the most, four or five laboratories in France preserve a few pure grains for the needs of scientific investigation. It is impossible to imagine that any man in this part of the country possesses an atom of it, or even knows of its existence. For where, and how could he have procured it?"

"And yet you—"

"That's another thing entirely. Years ago, when I was many leagues from here, I rendered a very great service to an eminent chemist, and he made me a present of this—this product of his art. But it would be impossible to trace this bottle back to its origin, for it came into my hands more than ten years ago, and, moreover, the chemist is dead."

"Ten years ago!"

"Twelve, I think. And yet this substance has lost none of its precious qualities."

"How can you be certain of that?"

"Why, I experimented with it only a month ago. I threw a pinch of this powder into a bowl of milk and gave it to a bull-dog. He lapped the milk for ten seconds and then rolled over dead."

Overwhelmed with horror, Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg started back. "Horrible!" she stammered, "horrible!"

A smile played over the "judge's" thin lips. "Why horrible?" he asked. "The dog had been bitten. He might have gone mad and bitten me, and I should have expired in frightful agony. Wasn't it a case of legitimate self-defence? Ah! men are at times even more dangerous than dogs. A man morally murders me—I suppress him. Am I guilty? the law says yes, and condemns me. In my opinion, however, it is better to kill the devil than—"

He said no more, for Diane abruptly placing her hand before his mouth, thus ended the exposure of his monstrous theories. "Listen!" she muttered.

A heavy step could be heard on the stairs.

"Norbert!" gasped Diane.

"Impossible! can his father—"

"It is Norbert," repeated Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg, and snatching the black phial from Dauman's hands, she thrust it into her bosom.

For one moment she had really been gifted with second sight. The new comer was indeed Norbert and none other. He opened the door and at sight of him both Dauman and Diane uttered a cry of terrified surprise. Everything in his appearance indicated some terrible catastrophe, his automatic motion, his haggard eyes, and the blood on his face. Dauman scented a crime. "You are wounded, marquis," he said.

"Yes; my father struck me."

"Can it be possible that he—"

"Yes, it was he!"

Diane had feared something worse than this; she quivered like a leaf as she went towards Norbert. "Let me examine your wound," she said softly, and standing on tiptoe the better to see, she took his head in her hands. "Good heavens! one inch lower down and—" She shuddered.

"Judge," give me some water and some old linen—"

But Norbert gently disengaged himself. "We will attend to this trifle later," said he, "I avoided the blow, which would have felled me to the ground, had it come in full force; in fact, but for my alacrity, I should have been murdered by my father."

"By the duke? And why—what has happened?"

"He had insulted you, Diane: and he dared to tell me of it—to boast of it to me! Didn't he know that the blood of the Champdoce's runs in my veins as well as in his?"

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg burst into tears. "And it is I," she sobbed—"I who brought all this upon you."

"You! You saved his life, probably. When he struck me with his stick, the thought of you withheld my hand. I turned and fled, and never again will I cross that threshold. We hear a great deal of a father's curse—a son's should have equal weight. The Duke de Champdoce is my father no longer—I know him no more. I wish I could forget his very existence, but no—I prefer to remember him, so that I may yet avenge myself."

Never in his life had Dauman felt such intense joy. Ah! his own vengeance also was near at hand. "At last, marquis," said he, "you will believe with me that there is some good in almost all misfortunes. Your father's imprudence will cost him dear. It now rests with us to shake off the paternal yoke just as soon as we choose. We now possess all the requisite elements for a formal complaint. We have sequestration, threats, violence connived at by third parties, wounds and blows which have imperilled life—in fact, we have everything we want. A physician will come, examine your head, and draw up a formal, written report. We can produce plenty of witnesses of the accessory facts—and, as to the wound, the scar will tell the story. To begin with, we shall pray in our petition, not to be ordered back to the paternal home, and sue for legal emancipation—"

"But tell me," interrupted Norbert, "if I am emancipated, as they say, from parental control shall I be able to marry whom I please without M. de Champdoce's consent?"

Dauman hesitated. In his opinion, under all the circumstances, Norbert might eventually obtain from the courts the authorisation to contract an

honourable alliance, but this would mean litigation, and patience, so he thought it advisable not to say so.

"Then why petition? The Champdoce family have always washed their dirty linen at home, and I prefer to do the same."

This determination seemed to astonish the "judge." "If I dared," he began, "if I dared to advise you, sir—"

"No. No advice is necessary; my mind is made up. But I need some assistance, in fact, within twenty-four hours I must have a large sum—twenty thousand francs."

"You can have them, sir; but I warn you that it will be at a heavy cost."

"I care nothing for that!"

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg tried to speak, but Norbert prevented her. "Don't you understand me, Diane?" he said. "We must fly! Let us go at once, and search for some retreat where we may live happy and obscure."

"But this is folly! you would be pursued," said Dauman.

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg hung her head.

"Is it true, Diane," continued Norbert pleadingly, "that you hesitate to intrust yourself to me? I swear to consecrate my entire existence to you—all my thoughts, all my will. I ask you on my knees to go with me!"

"I cannot!" she murmured, "I cannot!"

"You do not love me!" he cried, in a tone of despair. "Fool that I am, I believed that your heart was mine, but I see now that you never loved me!"

"Thou hearest him! Oh, my God! Thou knowest that I love him!"

"Then why reject our only means of safety?"

"Norbert, my dear Norbert—"

"I understand only too well. The thought of the world's talk frightens you—there are prejudices, opinions—"

He stopped, checked by the reproachful expression of Diane's eyes. "Must it be?" she asked—"must I justify myself? You talk to me of prejudices—have I not defied them already, and has not the world sat in judgment upon me? And yet what have I done? I could repeat every word we either of us have breathed, to my mother without a blush; but would any one believe me? No, no one. The opinion of the world is already made up, no doubt. My reputation is unquestionably gone, and yet I am as guiltless as a child."

Norbert was furious. "Who has dared to mention your name except with the most profound respect?" he asked.

"Alas! my friend, everybody. And to-morrow it will be worse still. Some hours ago, while your father was talking to me with such appalling violence and contempt, four woodcutters, binding faggots in the wood, overheard him."

"That is impossible!"

"No, it's true," affirmed Dauman. "I heard it all from one of these four men—"

If ever a man received a quiet intimation to leave a room it was conveyed in a glance which Diane now gave the "judge." He took the hint at once, and lastly rose from his seat. "Excuse me," he said; "but I just heard some one calling, and I must prevent any one from coming in here!" With these words he left the room, hanging the door behind him.

It needed this noise for Norbert to notice that he and Diane were now alone together. "And so," exclaimed the young fellow, "the Duke de Champdouce did not even take the precaution of ascertaining whether there was anyone to overhear his insults. And he was so blind that he did not realise that in dishonouring you he was dishonouring himself."

"Alas!—"

"Does he think he can force me to marry this heiress of his—this Marie de Paymaudour?"

At last Diane knew the name of the woman whom the duke had chosen to become his son's wife. "Ah!" she murmured, "it is Mademoiselle Marie, then, whose hand is offered to you?"

"Yes, it's she, or rather her millions; but my hand shall shrivel before it takes hers. You hear me, Diane?"

She smiled sadly as she murmured, "Poor Norbert," speaking moreover in such a melancholy tone, that the young man's heart sank.

"You are cruel," he exclaimed: "what have I ever done to deserve your distrust? What oath shall I take that I will never have any other wife but you? Is it because you doubt me that you will not go with me?"

"No, it is not any distrust of you that deters me."

"But what is it, then? Is it not liberty and happiness that I propose? What keeps you from accepting?"

She rose, threw her head back with haughty pride, and answered, "My conscience! Yes, my conscience—the same that has hitherto enabled me to walk with head erect, despite all the slander I knew was being circulated. But now it bids me stop, and I dare not disobey its voice. Duty may be hard to perform, my heart may break; but I must not, I cannot go with you. If I were alone in the world, I should, perhaps, not hesitate; but I have ties, I have a family whose honour is a sacred trust."

"A family that sacrifices you to an elder brother!"

"That may be—so the more my merit if I do my duty. Where did you even hear that virtue was easy to practise?" Norbert was too much oppressed with the thought of losing her to notice the contradiction of her conduct. She had preached insubordination to him, but pretended to practise duty herself. "Both my reason and my conscience," she resumed, "dictate the same course. The result is fatal when a young girl sets social rules and conventionalities at defiance. You would soon cease to esteem her whom others despised."

"Good heavens! what an opinion you have of me!"

"I believe you to be a man, my friend. Suppose I followed you to-day, and suppose to-morrow you heard that my father had fought a duel on my account, and had been killed—what then? Believe me, I give you the best possible advice in bidding you depart alone. You will forget me; indeed, you must!"

"Forget you!" cried Norbert fiercely. "I forget you! Can you forget me?"

He was so close to her that she felt his burning breath. "I," she stammered, "I—"

Norbert drew back that he might better look into her eyes. "And if I went alone," he asked, "what would become of you?"

At this question Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg turned extremely pale. A sob rose from her heart, and her strength seemed suddenly to fail her. "I," she answered, in as sweet and resigned a voice as if she had been a Christian martyr about to enter the arena, "I know my fate. We see each

other now for the last time. I shall return to Sauvebourg, where everything is known—or will be known in a few hours. I shall find my father irritated, enraged, he will order me to a carriage, and to-morrow the walls of a convent will again close round me."

"Never! never! That life would be long agony to you; you have told me so over and over again."

"Yes," she answered, "it would be agony; but it is duty also. And when the burden grows too heavy—when I can no longer bear it—" As she spoke, she had drawn Dauman's black phial from her bosom, and Norbert, on perceiving it, at once understood what she meant. As he tried to snatch it from her, she resisted; but the contest soon exhausted her little remaining strength. As Norbert at last clutched the phial in his hands, her beautiful eyes closed, her head fell back, and she sank into her lover's arms, while he, with horror, asked himself if she were dying. Dying she might have been, and yet she murmured a few words in a low but distinct whisper. She implored Norbert to restore to her that precious phial, her only friend and liberator; and then, with truly wonderful lucidity, she contrived to repeat to him all the directions Dauman had given her. "Oh! my friend," she said, "return it to me. I shall not suffer—in ten seconds all will be over. A mere pinch of it in wine or coffee will suffice, and no one will ever suspect the truth; for it leaves no trace behind it."

At the thought that this woman loved him so tenderly and passionately that she would rather die than live apart from him, Norbert felt his senses reel. "Diane!" he repeated, as he leaned over her. "Diane!"

But she continued, as if in delirium, "To die after such fair hopes! Ah! M. de Champdoce, you are pitiless, indeed. You have robbed me of my happiness; you have insulted me, lowered me in the estimation of the world, blackened my reputation, and now you want my life."

Norbert uttered a cry of mingled rage and hatred—so terrible a cry that even Dauman, listening as usual at the key hole, felt frightened. An execrable idea had just dawned on the young man's mind; and as he deposited Diane in the "judge's" arm-chair, he exclaimed in a hoarse voice, "No, you shall not kill yourself, nor shall I depart!" He looked at her once again; she smiled faintly, murmuring his name, with parted lips eager to be kissed. Norbert's last ray of reason fled. "You shall be mine!" he murmured. "The poison you intended for yourself shall serve my vengeance." A moment later and he had gone.

Dauman was livid, and his teeth were fairly chattering when he returned to his office. He had lost nothing of this scene, and, hardened as he was, it had greatly impressed him. He could barely fancy himself awake when he saw Diane—whom he had expected to find in a fainting condition—standing near the window, and carefully scrutinising Norbert as the latter hastened away. She was pale, no doubt, and her eyelids were red and swollen, but her eyes themselves flashed with all the pride of victory. "To-morrow, 'judge,'" she said; "to-morrow I shall be the Duchess de Champdoce!"

Dauman, the ready speaker, the man of many words, was so confounded that he made no rejoinder.

"I mean," resumed Diane, "providing the truth is not discovered to-night."

At these words Dauman felt a cold shiver along the spine; but summoning all his self-possession he replied, "I do not understand you; what could be discovered to-night? Pray, explain—"

She gave him such a contemptuous, ironical look, that his sentence ended in an inarticulate murmur. He recognized his error. He had fancied he might play with her like a cat with a mouse, but he was mistaken; it was she who had played with him. He had been her dupe. "There is no doubt of success, of course," she resumed coldly, "only—Norbert is awkward sometimes." Then, as she arranged her attire, she added, "I must return home—my father will be anxious. Ah! what a night of suspense is in store for me! When will to-morrow come? Good-evening, 'judge.' Everything will be decided when we meet again."

Dauman had shuddered on hearing these words: "Norbert is awkward sometimes." Could he really be sure of impunity; might not Norbert or Diane, rather, betray him? The "judge" sank into his arm-chair and tried to think. Perhaps, at this very moment, it was all over.

Meanwhile Norbert had hastened towards Champdoce. He had really lost his head, and yet, like a true madman, he fancied he could reason clearly. All his ideas, however, converged to the criminal purpose he had in view. All the work-folks at Champdoce, and Norbert with them, drank the common but healthy wine of the district; the duke alone reserving for his especial use a higher class vintage, grown on an estate of his in the Medoc. "The master's wine," as the servants said, was drawn direct from the cask, and served in a bottle which, after each meal, remained on a shelf in the common hall, within sight and touch of everybody. But no one ever dared to finger it. Now Norbert had thought of this bottle, and had formed his plan accordingly. Crossing the court-yard, without paying the least attention to the labourers who were loading straw there, he reached the common hall, and to his satisfaction found it empty. Then with singular prudence—remarkable on the part of a person in his state of mind—he opened each door in succession, and glanced out of every window to make sure he was not being watched. Next, with extreme rapidity and prodigious precision, he took his father's wine bottle from the shelf, swiftly uncorked it, and dropped therein, not one pinch, but three pinches of the powder contained in Dauman's phial. To dissolve it the sooner, he gently shook the bottle, taking care not to render the wine either turbid or frothy. He was certainly unconscious of his acts, and yet his carefulness and exactitude were remarkable. As some specks of the powder clung to the rim of the bottle's neck, he carefully wiped them off, not with a napkin, but with his own pocket-handkerchief; and then he replaced the bottle on the shelf, took his customary seat in the corner, and waited.

At this moment M. de Champdoce was striding up and down the avenue. For the first time in his whole life, probably, the headstrong, obstinate old nobleman had begun to regret his conduct. He had been thinking of the very same matters that Dauman had explained to Norbert, and was obliged to admit to himself that he had been exceedingly rash. Norbert had deserved punishment, no doubt; but the law does not trifle with cases of sequestration and ill-usage, and the duke feared lest a complaint might be lodged against him. In that case the courts would probably remove Norbert from his control, the young fellow would find evil advisers, and then good-bye to all his cherished plans. Such a catastrophe must, if possible, be averted, and so the duke resolved to act with all possible caution. He did not relinquish his views in regard to his son's marriage with Made-moiselle de Puymandour. No—he would sooner have renounced it itself; but he resigned himself to the conviction that he must substitute cunning for violence. The point of greatest importance now was to bring Norbert

back. But would the young fellow ever consent to enter the château again? M. de Champdoce was ruminating, with a heavy frown, on this particular question, when a servant came in haste to tell him that Norbert had returned. "I have him!" muttered the duke, and at once he hurried to the château.

When he entered the common hall, Norbert, forgetting his customary deference, did not rise, and this non-observance of the usual rules struck the duke most forcibly. "*Jarnicoton!*" thought he, "does the young scamp imagine he no longer owes me any deference?" However, he did not audibly express his displeasure; in fact, the blood on his son's face worried him exceedingly. "Norbert," he asked, "are you in pain? Why haven't you had your wound dressed?" The reply he paused for did not come. "Tell me," he resumed, "why haven't you had that blood washed away? Is it left as a reproach for me? I didn't need it, I assure you, to regret my anger—and violence." Norbert still offered no remark, and his silence seemed to embarrass the duke frightfully. The old nobleman hardly knew how to continue—he was so unfitted for the new part he had now decided upon playing; and thus, at last, more to gain time than to quench his thirst, he took his bottle of wine from off the shelf and poured out half a glassful. Norbert, who had watched him, quivered from head to foot. "Come now, my lad," said the duke, "come now, try and make friends with your old father. A man of honour is never ashamed to acknowledge his mistakes." As he spoke, he took hold of his glass and raised it to the light.

Norbert held his breath—it seemed to him as if the floor was giving way beneath his feet; his brain whirled, his blood boiled, and yet he did not move.

"It is cruel," continued the duke, "it is sad for a man to humiliate himself thus before his son, and to do so uselessly."

In vain did Norbert turn away his head. He could still see M. de Champdoce bring the glass nearer and nearer to his lips; he was on the point of drinking—but no, Norbert could not suffer that. With one bound he reached his father's side, and, snatching the glass from his hand, he threw it out of the window, shouting in a terrible voice, "Do not drink it!"

The young fellow's expression, voice, and motion required no explanation. A terrible light flashed upon his father. The duke's features quivered, his face became suffused, blood rushed to his eyes—he opened his lips to speak, but only a hoarse rattle was heard; he extended his arms convulsively, and then fell back, striking the back of his head against the corner of a heavy oak dresser. Norbert had rushed out of the room. "Come quick!" he cried. "Help! I have killed my father!"

IX.

THE DUKE de Champdoce had not underrated M. de Puymandour's mad longing to be considered a genuine nobleman. He had been happier in his earlier years when the name of Palouzat, his honest father's, had sufficed for his ambition. Then, undoubtedly, he was a man of mark, respected for the ability he had shown in honestly amassing an enormous fortune. Matters changed, however, on the day when he took it into his head to buy a title from the Pope, and sport address cards bearing the inscription, "Comte de Puymandour." From this moment his tribulations began.

With the nobility, who laughed and refused to recognize him as one of themselves, on the one side, and the middle classes, who sneered at his pretensions, on the other, he was like a shuttlecock between two battledores, battered and banged about, and sent spinning to and fro. Still he clung more ardently than ever to his aristocratic pretensions, and eagerly desired that his daughter might marry the son and heir of the high and mighty Duke de Champdoce. He had agreed to sacrifice the third of his fortune for the honour of this alliance, and would, indeed, have given the whole of it to have dandled on his knees an infant-duke, with the blood of the Palouzats and that of the heroes of the Crusades mingled in his veins. This marriage was, in his estimation, calculated to silence all raillery. As the flag covers the merchandise, so would his son-in-law's authentic rank and ancestry prove his passport into aristocratic society, assuring him fitting deference and courtesy on the part of those who now so openly derided him.

As soon as arrangements were finally concluded with the duke, M. de Puymandour resolved to acquaint his daughter with his intentions. He never dreamed of any obstacle, and, indeed, he candidly believed that she would be as pleased as himself. Having come to this determination—it was one morning whilst he sat alone in his library—he rang the bell, and, as soon as his valet appeared, exclaimed, "Go and ask mademoiselle's maid if my daughter can grant me an interview."

Although given with an air of great solemnity, this order in no wise seemed to astonish the valet. In fact, M. de Puymandour was habitually ceremonious, and his deriders declared that the etiquette of the court of Austria was nothing in comparison with that which prevailed in his household. However, less than two minutes after the servant left the room, there came a tap at the door. "Come in," exclaimed M. de Puymandour, and at once his daughter Marie appeared, and flinging both arms round his neck, kissed him heartily on either cheek. The count frowned, as if this display of affection displeased him, and then inquired, "Why did you come here, Marie? I asked if you would receive me."

"To be sure you did, dear father; but I thought it more natural for me to come here; besides, it was much more quickly done. Pray don't be vexed."

"Always the same story. When will you acquire the dignity of manner which ought to distinguish a young person of your rank and position?"

Marie de Puymandour smiled, but oh! so faintly; for although she was conscious of her father's absurdities, she was not disposed to sit in judgment upon them, for she loved him very tenderly. She was a very charming girl, and the Duke de Champdoce had not flattered the portrait he had drawn of her to Norbert. Although her style of beauty was very different, to that of Diane's, she was none the less of bewitching loveliness—tall, and of shapely form, and with all that languid grace of attitude and motion which distinguishes the women of the south. Her cheeks were two blush roses, her big black eyes were as soft as velvet, and she had a wondrous wealth of bluish-black hair. Unlike Diane in person, she was yet even more unlike her in mind. She had a tender heart, capable of intense devotion, and the angelic sweetness of her disposition at times even degenerated into weakness.

"Now, dear papa," she said, in answer to her father's words of blame, "come, don't scold me. You know that the Marchioness d'Arange gave me lessons of dignity last winter, and I'm practising in secret. Why, you yourself will be intimidated when I've learned them perfectly."

"Ah! women, women!" muttered her father. "What frivolous creatures they are! The most serious matters only furnish them with food for jest and scolding." So saying he rose, and assuming an oratorical attitude, resumed, "I ask myself with anxiety, Marie, whether you will be equal to the exalted position I have in view for you. You were eighteen last month, and it is time to consider your future. I have an important piece of news for you. In fact, I have had an application for your hand."

Marie dropped her eyes and endeavoured to conceal her confusion.

"Before coming to a decision on so grave a subject," continued M. de Puymandour, "it was, of course, necessary for me to give it serious reflection. I have made full inquiries, and I am certain that the proposed alliance offers every guarantee of human happiness. The young man is only a few years older than yourself. He is good-looking, his fortune is considerable, he is of noble birth, and bears the title of Marquis—"

"He has spoken to you, then?" interrupted Marie in an agitated tone.

"He? Who do you mean by 'he'?" As the girl did not answer, her father repeated his question.

"Why, M. George de Croisenois," replied Marie faintly.

"What have you to do with Croisenois?" retorted M. de Puymandour. "And who is this Marquis de Croisenois? Is he that fop with little moustaches whom I saw hanging round your skirts this winter?"

"Yes," she stammered, quite out of countenance; "that is he."

"Why should you suppose he has asked for your hand? Did you know he intended doing so?"

"My dear father—"

"There's no 'dear father' in this case. What! my daughter—a Puymandour—listens to a declaration and conceals it from me! Zounds! He has written to you, I suppose? What have you done with his letters?"

"Dear father—"

"Silence! You have preserved these letters, no doubt? Very well, I must see them."

"Dear father—"

"The letters!" interrupted M. de Puymandour in a formidable voice; "where are they? I must have them, even if I turn the whole house topsy-turvy."

Marie was incapable of dissimulation, and such was her father's anger that she dared not resist him; so she surrendered these precious missives, four in number, tied together with a blue ribbon. He at once opened the topmost one and read it aloud, interspersing his perusal with invectives and exclamations. "Mademoiselle, although I fear nothing in the world so much as your displeasure, I venture, notwithstanding your commands, to write to you once more. Pardon me, but I learn that you are on the point of leaving Paris for several months. I am twenty-four years of age. I am an orphan, and my own master. I belong to an old and honourable family, my fortune is considerable, and I love you with the most sincere and respectful love. May I entreat you, therefore, to authorise me to ask M. de Puymandour for your hand? My great uncle, the Duke de Sairmeuse, who knows your father, will act as my intermediary on his return from Italy, that is in three or four weeks' time at the utmost. Once more, imploring your forgiveness, I am, Mademoiselle, &c., &c."

"Very nice indeed—very nice," said the count as he finished reading. "The scamp doesn't beat about the bush. That's quite enough for me—I need read no more. And what did you write in return?"

"That he might apply to you, dear father."

"Indeed! you do me too much honour, upon my word. And you thought I should listen patiently to propositions from such a source? You love him, then?"

She averted her face, and tears streamed down her cheeks. This mute avowal, for avowal it was, exasperated M. de Puymandour. "You love him!" he exclaimed, "and you have the audacity to own it. Ah! what times we live in! Any girl is at the mercy of an adventurer!"

Marie looked up quickly. "The Marquis de Croisenois," said she, "comes of a good family."

"Pshaw! you know nothing about it. The first Croisenois was an orrand boy of Richelieu's. Louis XIII. conferred this title upon him for some dirty piece of work he executed for him. Has your petty marquis any real means of subsistence?"

"Most certainly. Some fifty thousand francs a year."

"Stuff and nonsense."

"But am I not rich enough for both of us?"

"Ah! that's the point. That's what the scamp was after—your money! Do you think I've slaved for twenty years for the sake of a Croisenois! No, no, I won't hear of him. His conduct has been most disgraceful. When a man of honour is in love, he goes to his notary, and lays before him his intentions and position. This notary goes to the notary of the young lady's family, and when the two notaries have studied and found everything satisfactory, then the heart is allowed to speak. And, besides, we need not candy words; you must forget this Croisenois as quickly as possible. I have chosen a husband for you, and have given my word of honour—you will have to keep it. On Sunday, the young man will be introduced to you; on Monday, a visit to the bishop, to ask him to bless your union; on Tuesday, a round of visits to announce the engagement; on Wednesday, the reading of the contract; on Thursday, a great betrothal dinner; on Friday, the examination of the *trousseau*; on Sunday, the banns, and at the end of the week after, the wedding will take place."

Mademoiselle Marie listened aghast. "For heaven's sake, dear papa, be serious!" she pleaded.

The count merely shrugged his shoulders. "Finally," added he, "the husband I have selected for you is the Duke de Champdouce's son, young Marquis Norbert."

Marie turned deadly pale. "But I don't even know him!" she stammered. "How can I love him?"

"I know him, then, and that is quite enough. I have decided you shall be a duchess, and I mean it."

Marie loved M. de Croisenois more than she had told her father—more even than she dared avow to herself. So she at first resisted with a heroism most unexpected on the part of a girl endowed with so mild a nature, and so weak a character. M. de Puymandour, however, was not the man to readily abandon the dream of his life. He did not leave his daughter for a minute in peace—he argued, insisted and domineered—until at last, on the third evening, Marie surrendered, and murmured the fatal "yes" amid sobs and tears.

The word had scarcely passed her lips when her father, not lingering even to thank her for the sacrifice, exclaimed, "I must go at once to Champdouce. I have had no news from there for the last three days, and there were still several points to be settled between the duke and myself."

Thereupon he hastened off, just adding as he closed the door, "I shall soon be back, my little duchess."

He had every reason to wish to see the duke, for when they parted, three days before, the old nobleman had said to him, "To-morrow you will hear from me," but not a word had come. The delay had suited M. de Puymandour, inasmuch as it had enabled him to conquer his daughter's resistance; but now that she was reduced to submission, he began to feel very anxious. Could anything have gone wrong? He walked on at a rapid pace, and had just reached the rising ground near Bivron, when he perceived "judge" Dauman talking earnestly with the widow Rouleau's daughter. Despite his haste, M. de Puymandour bowed affably and stopped, for he was now courting popularity, preparatory to coming forward as a candidate at the next election. Now Dauman, despite his villainous reputation, was undoubtedly an influential personage, and an able electioneering agent as well, whenever occasion required. "Good-day, 'judge,'" said the count, "what's the news?"

Dauman bowed to the ground. "Sad news, Monsieur le Comte," he answered; "I hear that the Duke de Champdoce is very ill."

"The duke! Impossible!"

"Well, this girl has just told me so. Tell us all about it, Françoise."

The girl curtsied and replied "I've just heard at the château that it is quite impossible for him to recover."

"But what's the matter with him?"

"I didn't hear."

M. de Puymandour stood aghast.

"That is always the way in this world," observed Dauman, philosophically. "In the midst of life we are in death—"

"Good-bye, 'judge,'" interrupted the count, "as this is the case, I must try and obtain some further particulars." So saying, he hurried on, breathless and anxious. All the people belonging to the château—servants and farm-hands—were gathered together in the court-yard, talking earnestly, but as soon as M. de Puymandour appeared, Jean, the duke's confidential valet, advanced to meet him. "Well," cried the count, "tell me what is the matter?"

"Oh! Monsieur le Comte, a most awful misfortune! My poor master—"

"Is he dead?"

"Alas! he is hardly any better!"

"But how is it he has so suddenly fallen ill?"

"It came like a flash of lightning," responded Jean, after a moment's hesitation. "On the day before yesterday, at about this same hour, Monsieur le Duc was alone with Monsieur Norbert in the common hall, when we heard Monsieur Norbert suddenly shriek for help. We hastened in and found Monsieur le Duc lying on his back on the floor, unconscious, with his face all black and swollen."

"He had had a fit of apoplexy, then?"

"No, not exactly—the doctor called it a suffusion of blood to the brain, and said he would have died at once if, in falling, he had not struck his head against the oak dresser, cutting himself so that he bled profusely. We carried him to bed, he was stiff and—"

"And now?"

"Well, now, no one can say anything for certain. My poor master neither sees nor hears; and if he recovers, which I scarcely believe possible, the doctor says, that at all events his mind is gone for ever."

"Frightful ! frightful ! Such a noble, worthy, remarkable man ! I don't ask you to let me go upstairs, for I could do him no good, and the sight would be a most painful one ; but if I could see Monsieur Norbert —"

"Don't think of it, Monsieur le Comte, I beg of you !" said Jean, with a sudden start.

"I was his father's friend, his intimate friend ; and if sympathy could soften the marquis's grief—"

"Impossible, Monsieur le Comte," rejoined Jean in a curt, gloomy voice. "My young master is with his father, he has not left him for a moment, and he has given orders not to be called on any pretence. But I must go to him now. We are expecting two physicians who are coming from Poitiers."

"I will retire, then, and to-night I will send for news."

M. de Puymandour walked slowly away, in a most anxious, despondent state of mind. The old servant's manner, voice and look had struck him as very singular. Had he told him the whole truth ? The count recalled the fact that Norbert was alone with M. de Champdoco at the time of the accident ; and bearing his own daughter's resistance in mind, he jumped to the conclusion that the duke had met with similar opposition from his son, that a violent quarrel had followed, and that, mad with anger, the old nobleman had been struck with this fatal fit. Interest, indeed, so sharpened M. de Puymandour's natural penetration, that he came singularly near the truth. "If this should really be the case," he thought, "it will be just the same whether the duke dies or loses his mind, for Norbert will certainly break off the negotiations." In that case, what could M. de Puymandour do, so as to escape ridicule ? Only one plan occurred to him, that of immediately marrying his daughter to the Marquis de Cloisenois, who, despite all he had said to the contrary, was in reality a most desirable husband.

The count was thus cogitating as he walked home, when suddenly he was startled by hearing some one ask him : "Was the girl right, Monsieur le Comte ?" Chance had again thrown Dauman across his path. "How is the duke ?" resumed the "judge"—"and Monsieur Norbert ? You saw him, of course ?"

"No ; the poor fellow is overwhelmed with grief. Fancy, his father has a suffusion of blood to the brain, and will remain an idiot even if he doesn't die."

"How awful !" answered the "judge." "For it really is a terrible thing indeed !" And then with a low bow, he turned towards his own house.

In point of fact, M. de Puymandour felt little or no pity for Norbert. He was mainly occupied in wondering whether his surmises as to the cause of the duke's attack were right ; and supposing such to be the case, what was Norbert thinking of, what were his intentions.

At that moment the young marquis was kneeling at his father's bedside, and with his heart full of anguish and remorse, watching for some indication of returning life or reason. Three days of horror and self-abasement had made him a different man. It was only at the very last moment, when the poison all but touched his father's lips, that he had realised the horror and enormity of his crime. His whole nature had revolted, and a formidable voice seemed to cry to him : "Assassin ! Parricide !" When his father fell back he had had strength enough to shout for assistance ; but immediately afterward, he was seized with a wild fear, and ran into the fields, at hap-hazard, as if hoping to escape from himself. Jean, the duke's

old confidential servant, had alone witnessed this precipitate flight, and a terrible presentiment had seized hold of him. He knew the cause of the estrangement existing between father and son; he was acquainted with the violence of their tempers, and with the fact that a woman was urging Norbert to resistance. After the frightful blow the duke had struck his son, he was amazed to see Norbert return home. What could be his intention in thus so speedily coming back to the château? Finally, Jean had been in the court-yard at the very moment when Norbert had flung the glass containing the poisoned wine out of the window. All these circumstances combined, made the old servant apprehensive of the truth, and so as soon as the duke had been put to bed, he went downstairs again into the common hall, convinced he should find something to confirm his fears. The bottle containing the duke's wine stood there on the table, three-quarters empty. What did this mean? With infinite care Jean poured several drops of the wine into the hollow of his hand; he tasted them cautiously, spitting them out again as soon as they had touched his palate. The wine retained its usual aroma and flavour. No matter. Obeying the inspiration of his devotion to the House of Champdoce, Jean carried the bottle to his own room, unperceived, and hid it there. He then bade another servant to remain with the duke until the doctor arrived, and went himself in search of Norbert.

He had searched in vain for fully a couple of hours, and utterly discouraged, was returning through the woods to the château, when on the turf, under a tree, he saw a human form extended. He advanced cautiously—yes, the man lying there was Norbert. The faithful old servant knelt down, and finding him all but unconscious, shook him roughly. With one bound the young fellow sprang to his feet. It seemed to him as if justice, human or divine, had just set its clutch upon him, and his eyes dilated with sudden terror. "It is I, Monsieur Norbert," said Jean.

"Ah! yes; what do you want?"

"I came to find you, sir, to beg you to return with me to Champdoce."

"Return to the château?" answered Norbert, in a hoarse voice. "No; not now."

"But you must, sir. Your absence would seem perfectly inconceivable. It would set people talking, and strange things might be said. Your place is at your father's bedside."

"Never! No, never!"

He said this; but he made no resistance when Jean slipped his arm through his, and drew him along. Thus led, Norbert retraced his steps, in automatic fashion, to the château, crossed the court, and ascended the stairs; but on reaching the door of his father's room he drew back, again in a state of abject terror, and tried to escape Jean's grasp. "I will not!" he gasped; "I cannot!"

"You can, and you shall," said the faithful old servant. "For, no matter what else happens, the family honour must not be tarnished in the eyes of the world."

These few words, the thought of the honour of Champdoce, gave Norbert just sufficient strength to stagger across the room and sink on the floor at the bedside. Once on his knees, with his forehead on his father's cold hand, he burst into tears. He sobbed aloud, and at the sound the farmhands clustering in the room breathed sighs of relief. They were only simple peasants, but on seeing Norbert, as white as if every drop of blood had been drawn from his body, with his lips quivering, and his eyes blazing

with fever, they had asked themselves if he were not mad? Indeed, he was not far from it. But with these tears relief came to his brain; and with thought, suffering returned. Still he had again become sufficiently master of himself, when the doctor arrived, to appear before him simply as an anxious son.

"There is no hope for your father, marquis," said the rough spoken country practitioner, by no means trying to soften the blow he dealt. "Even if we succeed in saving his life, we can't hope to save his reason. The truth ought always to be told to a patient's relations, and there you have it! I shall return to-morrow."

Norbert did not escort the doctor down-stairs. He had fallen on to a chair, with his hands clasped round his head, which throbbed as if about to burst. He sat in this way for half an hour or more, when suddenly he started to his feet with a stifled cry. He remembered the bottle he had dropped the poison into, and which had been left in the common hall. What had been done with it? Suppose one of the servants had profited of the duke's illness, to imbibe its contents. Everything might then be discovered. The intensity of Norbert's fears gave him sufficient strength to go down-stairs. The bottle was neither on the table, nor in its ordinary place on the shelf. He was searching for it in every corner, when suddenly the door opened and Jean appeared. At sight of his young master, the old servant was so impressed that he almost dropped the light he carried. "Why are you here, sir?" he asked, in a trembling voice.

"I wanted—" stammered Norbert; "I was looking for—"

The servant's suspicions were instantly transformed into convictions. He approached, and whispered in his ear, "You are looking for that bottle, are you not? Well, it's safe. I have it in my room. To-morrow we two will throw its contents away, and there will be no proof left."

Jean spoke so low, hardly articulating the syllables, that Norbert divined these words rather from the movements of his lips than from any sound. And yet it seemed to the young marquis that the valet's voice, recalling his awful crime, resounded like thunder, filling the whole château from roof to cellar. "Hush!" he said, looking around him with wild, affrighted eyes. "Hush!"

What more explicit confession than this was required? "Oh! we are alone, sir," murmured Jean. "Fear nothing. There are words, I know, which should never be spoken. If I have dared speak to you of a matter which I accidentally discovered, it was because it was my duty to reassure you, and warn you against any imprudence."

Norbert at once realised that the servant thought him more guilty than he really was. "Jean," he exclaimed, "what do you believe? My father never tasted that wine! I snatched the glass from him before his lips had touched it. I threw it out into the court-yard, and if you look you will find its fragments there."

"I am not your judge, sir, and you need give me no explanations. Whatever you bid me believe, I will believe."

"Ah! he doubts me," rejoined Norbert. "He will not believe me. I swear, in the name of all I hold sacred, I swear to you that I am innocent!"

The old valet shook his head sadly. "You must be so, sir, of course; for we two must save the honour of the house. But listen to me. Should it so happen that any suspicions are aroused, throw them all on me, I will defend myself, but in such a way that they will have all the more reason to believe me guilty; and now I think of it, I won't throw that bottle away

but keep it in my room, where it may be found. That would be all the proof required. What does it matter how a poor man like me is sent to another world? but you, a Champdoce—"

Norbert wrung his hands in despair. Jean's sublime devotion only proved to him that the man was convinced of his guilt. Once more he was endeavouring to explain, when suddenly a door was heard being banged to on the floor above. "Hush!" said Jean; "some one is coming down. We must not be seen whispering together like two conspirators; suspicion would then certainly be awakened. I can't get rid of the idea that the secret may be read on my face, or in your eyes. Quick, sir! go up-stairs and do your best to be calm. I entreat you not to risk the honour of your family, it is that which is now at stake!"

Norbert obeyed, and regained his father's room. The servant who had been watching there rose as he entered, and exclaimed, "The medicine the doctor ordered has just come, sir. I have given the duke a spoonful, and it seems to have had some effect already." Norbert looked—he was bound to do so, for hesitation would have been suspicious—and concurred with what the man had said. Then, as he wished to be alone, he told the man he might retire, for he would watch his father with Jean, and see that the medicine was regularly given. The servant thereupon withdrew, and Norbert wheeled a large arm chair in front of the bed, and sat down. In the state of mind in which he found himself, he could only with difficulty recall the series of swiftly succeeding events which had culminated in his abominable crime. But as he appealed, again and again, to memory, it seemed as if a bandage fell from his eyes—perception returned, and judgment also. He could still hear his father roughly exclaiming; "That girl is an *indigente*, she does not love you, she loves your name and your fortune." He had then been indignant, and had thought these words blasphemous. Alas! the duke had been right. He saw it now. How happened it he had not realised that this girl was throwing herself at his head; that her reserve and her frankness alike were artificial; that she it was who had impelled him into this fatal path leading to such an awful precipice? The monstrous meaning of the comedy enacted by Dame flashed upon him. She whom he had believed to be a pure and noble young girl had been the "judge's" accomplice. Between them they had excited him to madness, and finally, placed in his hands the poison intended for his father. He quivered with anguish as he realised all this, and his love for Diane de Sauvebourg turned to loathing.

Day broke at last, and worn out, he fell asleep. It was noon when he awoke. The sun was streaming into the room, and the doctor stood at the patient's bedside. He turned as Norbert stirred, and coming towards him exclaimed, "We shall save his body."

The prediction came true; that very night the Duke de Champdoce was able to turn over in his bed. The next day he uttered a few unintelligible words, and later again, he made those about him understand that he was hungry. His life was saved; but would not death have been a mercy? The powerful will that had guided his athletic form had vanished; his eyes had lost their glitter; his expression had become painfully idiotic. And there was no hope of cure, no hope of restoring the mind. The duke would be always thus—always! After realising the enormity of his crime, Norbert was now to measure the immensity of his chastisement.

It was now that Jean ventured to speak of M. de Puymandour's visit, and such was the change in Norbert that he regarded this circumstance as

a direct warning from Heaven. "So be it," he said. "At least my father's wishes in this respect shall be carried out." And without loss of time, he wrote to M. de Puymandour that he expected him, adding that he hoped the sad catastrophe which had just occurred would in no way modify the arrangements his father had made. Thus did Norbert de Champdoce seal his fate.

X.

LIKE the miner who has lighted his train, and draws aside and waits for the explosion, Diane de Sauvebourg had retreated home after leaving Dauman. Great as were her energy and strength of mind she could barely hide her anxiety, and at supper-time found it almost impossible to eat. However, neither her father nor mother took any notice of her strange excitement. During the day, they had received news that their son--the young fellow for whose sake Diane was to be sacrificed--had been taken dangerously ill in Paris, where he habitually resided. This intelligence made them very anxious, and they talked of starting for the capital almost immediately. Thus they made no objection, and expressed no surprise, when, on leaving table, Diane complained of a bad headache, and asked permission to retire. Alone in her room, she experienced inexpressible relief. The thought of going to bed never occurred to her. She wrapped herself in a dressing-gown, and opening a window, leaned out over the balcony. She gazed long and earnestly in the direction of Champdoce, for despite the lateness of the hour, it seemed to her impossible that Norbert should not attempt to see her, or at least try to find some means of informing her, whether he had succeeded or failed. The dawn almost surprised her, still watching with the same feverish anxiety; and as soon as practicable she went downstairs, and stationed herself in the garden at a point whence she could view the high road, hoping at each moment to see Norbert or some messenger arrive. No one appeared, however; the breakfast bell rang, and she had to take her place once more between her parents, and again pretend to eat.

Finally, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, she could bear it no longer; and so making her escape, she hurried towards Bivron, intending to see Dauman, who must, she thought, know something. Indeed, if he were as ignorant as herself, it would, at least, be a relief to talk with him, and ask him when, in his opinion, this terrible suspense would come to an end. No doubt he would speedily allay her apprehensions. In this she was mistaken. The "judge" had passed as wretched a night as herself, and had nearly died of terror. He had remained in his office all the morning, starting at the least noise and not daring to go out, desirous as he was of information, but the only news he had obtained, derived from a miller, who had called upon him, was that the Bivron doctor had been summoned to Champdoce the night before to attend on the duke, who was supposed to be dying. Dauman had just learnt this, and was feeling more nervous than ever when Diane arrived. At sight of her his pale face flushed, and, regardless of respect or civility, he uttered a terrible oath. "It's you, is it?" he said, "Why, what do you want? You are out of your senses to come here to-day. Do you want all Bivron to know that you and I are Norbert's accomplices?"

"Good heavens! what do you mean?"

"I mean that the duke isn't dead, and if he recovers we're lost. When I say 'we,' I mean myself of course; for you will get clear of it all, being a nobleman's daughter. We all know that the nobility take care of themselves, so I shall have to pay the piper."

"You said that the effect was instantaneous."

"I said that? It's false. Ah! if I'd only known! But I mean to deny everything. You deceived me and robbed me! Oh, I mean to defend myself, you'll see. I'll drag all you nobles down into the gutter. I'm an honest man, I am. You ought to have done the job yourself. You've some blood in your veins, but that fool, your lover's the veriest capon out." •

At these insulting words from such a scoundrel, she started up, and tried to protest, but he interrupted her: "I've no time to choose my words, for I feel as though I had a rope round my throat already. Now, do me a favour; take yourself off, and never show your face here again."

"As you please. I will send to Champdocé."

"No, you won't!" exclaimed Dauman with a threatening gesture. "Why, while you're about it, why don't you go and ask old Champdocé how he liked his poison?"

But Diane was not deterred by this sarcasm. Anything seemed preferable to further suspense, and indeed, after a long discussion, she at last prevailed on Dauman to try and find out what had really occurred at the chateau. Thanks, however, to Jean's precautions, none of the other servants were in a position to tell the truth, as Dauman ascertained after various discreet inquiries addressed to such of them as came to Bivron. There was but one resource left, that of dispatching the widow Rouleau's daughter to the chateau on the morrow, on the pretence of claiming some sixty crowns which were owed him by one of the duke's keepers named Méchinot. Françoise Rouleau, alas! had paid her mother's debts to Dauman by the sacrifice of her own virtue, and was now obedient to his behests. He instructed her so skilfully that she had no suspicion of her real mission, and he accompanied her halfway on her journey, to a spot where, it was arranged, he should meet Diane later in the day.

He did not wait long for his messenger's return. In less than twenty minutes he saw her coming back, and he rose in all haste to meet her. "Well!" he asked breathlessly, "has that scamp of a Méchinot got me my money?"

"Alas! no, sir. I couldn't even speak to him."

"He wasn't there, then?"

"I don't even know that. Ever since the duke has been laid up, the gates of the chateau have been bolted, and not a human being is admitted. It seems he's very low."

"Did you hear what the matter was?"

"No, sir; and all I tell you I learned from a stable boy, who spoke through the gate to me. But he hadn't said ten words before Jean arrived."

"Do you mean the duke's valet?"

"Precisely," answered Françoise; "and Jean was furious. He raved at the boy and told him to go back to the stable and stay there; and then he unbolted the gate and asked me, 'Well, my girl, what do you want?' I told him I had come to see Méchinot; but before I could say for what, he interrupted me and said, 'Well, he isn't here; you can call again next month.'"

"And was that all you did, simpleton?"

"Not exactly; I said I must find Méchinot. And then old Jean looked at me and asked, 'Who sent you here, you little spy?'"

The "judge" started. "Ah! and what did you answer?"

"Why, I said *you* sent me, of course."

"Ah! yes, that was right; and then?"

"Then Jean rubbed his chin and looked at me again, and said, very slowly, 'So—you come from the "judge," eh? I might have known it. Yes, I see, and he'll see too! You may tell him he'll have news from me.'"

Dauman, at these words, felt his legs quake, but he could not continue his questions, for at that moment he saw M. de Puymandour approaching on his way to the château. What transpired between the "judge" and the count has already been recorded. Dauman learnt what was the nature of the duke's illness, and in his ignorance of the real events, ascribed the fit to the effects of the poison. He decided in his own mind that Norbert had not hesitated, that if he, Dauman, were prosecuted the marquis must be prosecuted as well, and as this last was a highly improbable contingency he considered himself virtually saved. "The fact is," he said to Diane when the latter reached the meeting place, "M. Norbert can't have given a sufficient dose. The duke, you know, is as strong as an ox. However, it will be all right. If he lives, he'll be an idiot, and our object is achieved the same as if he had died."

Still Diane was uneasy. "But why doesn't Norbert write?" she murmured. "Why?"

"Why? Because he had a vestige of common sense. Don't you know that there may be a dozen spies at his heels! We must wait."

They waited—waited for a week, but still no sign from Norbert. Diane suffered intolerable agony, and each successive day seemed more and more infernal. At last Sunday arrived. The Marchioness de Sauvebourg had risen betimes and gone to early mass, arranging that her daughter should go to high mass at ten o'clock, accompanied by her maid. This arrangement suited Diane to perfection, for she hoped she should see Norbert. Alas! no. The service had begun when she entered the church, but the Champdoce seats were vacant. It would have been mockery for her to pray, still she pretended to follow the service, though all the while she was absorbed in anxious thought. However, at one moment, while rather less preoccupied, she noticed that the priest was just mounting the pulpit stairs. The congregation was all attention, and no wonder, for before preaching it was usual for the curé to publish the banns of marriage, a matter of immense interest for all the assembled villagers. Like a man who enjoys keeping his audience in suspense, the old priest looked blandly round the church, coughed, wiped his spectacles and his nose, and then leisurely drew a sheet of paper from between the leaves of his missal. "I publish the banns of marriage—" he began, and then paused artfully enough, so as to stimulate his hearers' curiosity—"Between Monsieur Louis-Norbert de Dompnir, Marquis de Champdoce, minor and legitimate son of Guillaume-César de Dompnir, and of his late wife, Isabelle de Barneville, of this parish—and Demoiselle Désirée-Anne-Marie Palouzat, minor and legitimate daughter of René-Auguste Palouzat, Comte de Puymandour, and of the defunct Zoé Staplet, his wife, also of this parish."

Such was the thunder crash, which came from the pulpit, and seemed to deafen Diane. Her heart ceased to beat. She thought she was going to die. However, the priest continued, "This will be the first and last public

cation of bans in view of the dispensation the contracting parties have obtained from our lord the archbishop. Any one who may know of any impediment to this marriage is charged, under penalty of excommunication, to acquaint us with it; while at this same time it is forbidden under the same penalty to create any impediment either in malice or without cause."

"Impediment!" What frightful irony. Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg knew of more than one. A wild longing came to her to start up and shriek aloud before them all, then and there, that this marriage could not take place; that Norbert was her husband before God; that he was bound to her by a tie stronger than all other ties—by that of crime. However, her pride saved her from this folly. She made a prodigious effort and remained still, white as snow, but with a smile on her lips; and seeing one of her friends a young girl of her own age—she made her a little sign, as if to say, "Who would have thought of that?" Now she devoted all her energy to retaining a bold, dispassionate countenance, and such was her wonderful strength of mind that she succeeded. Still, as soon as the service was over, she did not linger to converse with friends, but hurried homewards, followed by her maid. She longed to be alone, longed to allow her grief full course, unseen.

But a fresh calamity awaited her at Sauvebourg. As she entered the château, a servant, who seemed greatly agitated, rushed to meet her. "Ah, mademoiselle!" gasped the man, "such a terrible misfortune! Your father and mother are waiting for you. It is terrible."

She went slowly upstairs. No doubt she was going to learn that her intrigue with Norbert had been discovered, perhaps even something worse. When she entered the drawing-room, she perceived her father and mother sitting near each other and weeping. She went towards them, and the marquis, drawing her to him, pressed her tenderly to his heart. "Poor child!" he murmured; "poor, dear child; we have only you now."

Their son was dead. An express had brought the sad news while she was at church. She was an only child now, heiress to one of the largest fortunes in the province. If this catastrophe had occurred only one week before, it would have assured her marriage with Norbert, and she would never have committed that frightful crime. This was something more than the grim sarcasm of destiny—it was a chastisement. She burst into tears, not tears for her brother, but tears of rage and passion.

She could only think of Norbert, and still seemed to hear the old priest reading the bans of marriage. Why had her lover decided on marrying Marie de Puymandour, whom he did not even know, whom he had spurned off with loathing only a few days previously? Diane scented a mystery and determined to solve it. What had taken place at Champdocé? Had the duke, contrary to Daunay's predictions, recovered? Had he discovered his son's attempt, and pardoned it only on conditions he now yielded to his will? The day passed away in these futile conjectures, and in efforts to think of some means of preventing Norbert from marrying Marie de Puymandour; for Diane, cast down as she was, had not relinquished the struggle. She had a presentiment that she might triumph yet, providing she could only see Norbert for one minute alone. Had she not already, with one single look, influenced his career? Yes, she must see him, and instantly. The danger was urgent; so she determined she would go to Champdocé that very night.

A little after midnight, when she knew that everyone in the château was

asleep, she threw a mantle over her shoulders, crept down the stairs on tiptoe, and passed out through a side door.

Norbert had often described to her the arrangements of the *château de Champdoce*, and she knew that his room was on the ground floor, with two windows looking on to the court-yard. This was all she needed. Still, on reaching her destination, she hesitated. Supposing she mistook the window! However, she had now gone too far to retreat; and so, after deciding that if any one else but Norbert opened the window, she would turn and fly, she rapped against one of the shutters, softly at first, and then more roughly. Her memory had not deceived her. It was Norbert who appeared at the casement and inquired, "Who's there?"

"It is I, Norbert; it is I—Diane," she replied, and as the window was but a few feet from the ground, she boldly sprang into the room before he could recover from his surprise.

"What do you want?" asked Norbert wildly. "What brings you here?"

She looked at him; his face seemed almost that of a stranger, so greatly had he changed. She felt frightened, but had strength to murmur, "Do you really intend to marry *Mademoiselle de Puymandour*?"

"Yes."

"And yet you pretended you loved me?"

All Norbert's feelings of resentment, born on that sleepless night he had passed at his father's bedside, were revived. "Yes," he answered, "I loved you devotedly—madly, with a love that drove me to crime. But you—you cared only for a princely fortune and the title of duchess."

Diane raised her arms with a despairing gesture. "Should I be here at this hour if that were true? My brother is dead—I am as rich as you, Norbert, and yet I am here. You accuse me of mercenary calculations; and why? I suppose, because I refused to fly with you from my father's roof. Oh! my friend, it was our future happiness that I defended; it was—" She paused, breathless, and her eyes dilated with horror. The door had opened, and the Duke de Champdoce appeared, babbling incoherently, and laughing in that meaningless style peculiar to idiots.

"Do you understand now," asked Norbert, "why the remembrance of our love has become intolerable to me? Can you talk to me of happiness, when my father's phantom will ever more rise between us?" So saying he pointed to the window, and a moment later she had sprung out into the court-yard once more.

But rage and jealousy were gnawing at her heart. She could not forgive Norbert this crime she herself had committed—this crime which had blighted all her hopes, and her parting words were threats. "I shall avenge myself, Norbert," she cried. "We will meet again!"

XI.

ONLY three days—busy days, it is true—had been needed to complete the preliminaries of Norbert's marriage with *Mademoiselle de Puymandour*. One Saturday evening the two young people were presented to each other. They were mutually displeased; and at the first glance each felt that instinctive repugnance for the other which often cannot be conquered after long years of companionship. Whilst her father was goading her into submission, Marie had thought of confiding the secret of her heart to Norbert, hoping that he might be generous enough to abandon his suit, when he

learned that she loved another. But, alas ! she was weak and fearful, and at the decisive moment did not dare to speak ; thus losing the only chance of escaping a life of torture. At the first word on her part, Norbert would certainly have withdrawn, happy to avail himself of this pretext not to ratify the arrangements his father had made ; but then Marie remained silent, and thus events followed their natural course.

He was now allowed to pay his court, and presented himself each day at the Puymandour château carrying the traditional bouquet. He was regularly shown to the salon, where he presented the flowers to Marie with a compliment, while she accepted both bouquet and flattery with a burning blush. Then the two seated themselves, and, whilst an aged female relative played propriety, remained together for several hours ; Marie leaning over her embroidery-frame, and Norbert sadly out of countenance—both at a loss to keep up even a commonplace conversation. It was positive relief for both of them when M. de Puymandour proposed an excursion in the environs ; for with a man of his talkative disposition there was no irksome silence to fear. But then this seldom happened, the count declaring that he had not a moment to himself.

Never, indeed, had he seemed so gay and lively as since his daughter's marriage had been decided on. Despite the distressing condition of the Duke de Champdoce and Norbert's appeals, he had determined that the wedding should be a most magnificent affair, and incessantly busied himself with the preparations. The château was furnished anew for the festivities to be given therein. The carriages were all done up and repainted, with the Champdoce arms added to the Puymandour's. These arms were everywhere—over all the doors, carved on all the furniture, engraved on all the plate. Had it been at all advisable, M. de Puymandour would have even consented to their being burnt into his breast.

Amid this incessant stir and bustle, Marie and Norbert both grew sadder and more hopeless day by day. But M. de Puymandour pretended not to notice it. One afternoon, while they sat as usual in the salon, looking as woe-begone as two sinners performing penance, the count hurried in, all importance and excitement. "Well, well, children!" he exclaimed; "your example is so good a one that all the world seems inclined to follow it, and the mayor and the curé will be kept pretty busy this year." Mademoiselle Marie tried to look interested. "Yes," continued her father, "I have just heard of a wedding which will almost immediately follow yours, and make some little commotion too."

"And whose is that?" asked Norbert.

"I suppose you know the Count de Mussidan's son, Viscount Octave, who usually lives in Paris? Well, he has been staying here lately with his father, and in one short week he has lost his heart. Can you guess to whom? No, no doubt; but I'll tell you. He is about to marry Mademoiselle Diane de Sauvbourg."

"I hardly think that possible," urged Marie. "Why, she lost her brother only a fortnight ago!"

Whilst his *fiancée* spoke, Norbert had flushed scarlet and then turned absolutely livid. So great was his confusion that he nearly dropped the album he held.

However, M. de Puymandour proceeded. "I decidedly approve of Viscount Octave's choice. Mademoiselle Diane has not merely her beauty to boast of; she seems to me a most accomplished young person. She has a most distinguished air; and as to her mind, I have reason to think her

wonderfully clever." Thereupon he turned towards his daughter and added, "Now there's a model, Marie, which I should like you to copy--which it would be well for you to imitate--as you are so soon to become a duchess."

Whenever he started on this topic, M. de l'nymandour was not easily stopped, so his daughter calmly waited till he drew a long breath, and then left the room with a murmured apology of an order to give. However, the count was not much disturbed by her defection, for Norbert was left to him. "To return to Mademoiselle Diane," said he, "black is wonderfully becoming to her. Indeed, fair-haired beauties ought really to consider a relative's death as a piece of rare good luck. But I beg your pardon for singing her praises to you, who know her so much better than any one else."

"I, sir?"

"Yes, sir, you. I don't suppose you intend to deny the soft impeachment, do you?"

"I don't understand--"

"Well, I do, then. I understand that--that you have been making love to her, and that quite lately, my lad! Bless my soul! how you blush! What's in the wind now?"

"I assure you, sir--"

De l'nymandour laughed aloud. "I have heard a good deal of your little walks and talks, and all that sort of thing," said he.

In vain did Norbert protest and deny. His words did not make the least impression on the count. Seeing this, and feeling excessively annoyed, the young fellow would not remain to dinner, as M. de l'nymandour urged him to do, but declared he must return home to attend on his father. He was walking hastily back to Champdoco, lost in a reverie as usual, when suddenly he heard some one call to him by name. He turned, and to his surprise recognised Montlouis, the farmer's son, who had been his friend and confidant at Poitiers. "I'm glad to see you," said Norbert, with some little embarrassment, for Montlouis reminded him of much that he longed to forget. "How long have you been here?"

"A week or so," replied Montlouis; "I came here with my patron--for I have a patron now. The Viscount de Mussidan has engaged me as his private secretary. M. Octave is not the pleasantest man in the world to live with, for at times he flies into terrible passions; but after all, he is at heart the best of men, and so I'm very well content with my position."

"I am very glad to hear it, my friend, very glad."

"And you, marquis, I'm told, are to marry Mademoiselle de l'nymandour. When I heard it I could hardly believe my ears."

"And why, pray?"

"Why? because I remembered the time when we used to wait outside a certain garden till we saw a certain gate open mysteriously."

"But you must forget all that, Montlouis."

"Oh, sir! my lips are sealed except to you; no one else could ever extort a word from me. But, nevertheless, there are some strange things in life. Just fancy, your castaway--"

"Stop!" cried Norbert with a threatening gesture; "do you dare imagine--"

"Imagine what, sir?"

"I wish you to understand that Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg is as pure

to-day as she was when I saw her first. She was foolish, unquestionably, but guilty—no! I swear it before God!"

"And I believe you, sir; I believe you."

The fact is that he did not believe one word that Norbert said, and it was easy to read that it was so in his eyes. Still, he boldly resumed, "And all the more, too, as the young lady is to marry my patron."

"Then, it's really true," thought Norbert, and he added, aloud, "But when and where has Viscount Octave had means of seeing Mademoiselle Diane?"

"At Paris M. Octave was very intimate with her brother, and visited him constantly during his illness; so, as soon as the parents heard of his being in the neighbourhood, they sent for him to come and see them. He went at once, saw Mademoiselle Diane, and has ever since been most enthusiastic about her." Norbert's irritation was so evident that Montlouis checked himself, convinced that the marquis was still in love with Diane, and jealous into the bargain. "After all," he added, by way of consolation, "nothing is finally settled, as yet."

But Norbert was too much disturbed to endure Montlouis' chatter any longer. He pressed his hand and left him abruptly, walking off at a rapid pace. Did he really love Diane still? he asked himself. Could he never forget her? Was he such a coward as that, after all she had made him suffer? And then, love or passion apart, did not the future seem most threatening? Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg would marry the Viscount Octave de Mussidan, no doubt, and thus she must, constantly, come into contact with Montlouis, her husband's secretary. What would be her feelings in such a situation? Montlouis was acquainted with her meetings with himself (Norbert); he had often been intrusted with letters and messages for her. Besides, how would he behave on his side? Would he have the *sung froil* and tact required in so delicate a position? Norbert decided in his own mind that Diane would not be able to long endure Montlouis' presence near her person. Such being the case, she would seek some pretext for his dismissal, and if that happened, Montlouis, enraged at losing a comfortable livelihood, might retaliate by exposing her. Then, no doubt, M. de Mussidan would part from his wife. Diane would be cast on the world, beyond the pale of society, with all the social influence she had, undoubtedly, dreamt of, lost to her for ever. What would she do then? Would she not seek for revenge? And on whom? Why on himself, Norbert.

He had just asked himself if in these circumstances death would not really be a mercy, when suddenly, to his intense surprise, he saw the widow Rouleau's daughter, Françoise, standing before him. She had been waiting for him for two hours, hidden behind a hedge. "I have something here for you, sir," she said.

He took the letter she offered him, and opening it, he read as follows:—
"You said that I did not love you, you wish me to prove my love, possibly. Very well, let us elope to-night. I shall be sacrificed—but to you, by you, and for you! Reflect, Norbert. There is time still; to-morrow it will be too late." Yes, that is what Diane had dared to write. He stood with his eyes long fixed on this letter, which to him was thrillingly eloquent. Then did it not tell him something of the thoughts of her who penned it? Diane's usually firm, neat writing was here trembling and confused. The three last words were nearly illegible. In many places the writing was blurred and the paper blistered, was it with tears? But then writing may be

intentionally irregular, and drops of water sometimes do duty for tears. "Does she love me?" he murmured.

He hesitated—yes, he hesitated, touched by the idea that she would sacrifice for him her honour, family and fortune; that she was his if he raised his finger; that in two hours, seated by her side, he might be driving at full speed towards some foreign land. His heart beat madly, and he gasped for breath, when suddenly, fifty paces down the road, he caught a glimpse of a man's figure. It was his father. This was the second time that by his simple presence the duke had triumphed over Diane and all her power of fascination.

"Never!" cried Norbert, with such energy that Françoise retreated, terrified. "Never! never!" And crushing the letter with unconscious violence, he flung it on the ground (where Françoise picked it up a moment later), and rushed forward to meet his father.

The duke, then, had recovered from his attack? Recovered, yes, in one sense. In the sense that his life was saved—that he rose from bed, walked about, ate and slept as of yore. He went to look at the labourers in the fields, and thence strolled to the stables; but he had no recollection of what he saw nor even consciousness of it. The state of his health had, indeed, created many difficulties, which would have seriously embarrassed Norbert but for M. de Puymandour's shrewd assistance.

The wedding was necessarily delayed. Still it came at last. Norbert and his bride were driven to the mayor's, and thence to the church, every formality was fulfilled, and the Marquis de Champdoce and Marie de Puymandour were yoked together for life.

Five days later, after a round of hypocritical festivities which the bride's father obstinately refused to curtail, they were installed at Champdoce. With a wife whom he could not love, and whose sadness was a perpetual reproach to him, and with a father who had lost his mind, no wonder that Norbert at times felt tempted to suicide. A prey to regrets and remorse, seeing no object in life, no finish to his tortures, this fatal idea of self destruction was daily gaining more hold on his mind, when one morning he was told that the duke refused to get up. The doctor was sent for, and at once declared that M. de Champdoce was in danger. A kind of reaction was setting in, and all day long the invalid seemed to be in a state of great excitement. His powers of speech, which had been much impaired, seemed suddenly restored to him. Finally, he became delirious, whereupon Norbert and Jean sent everyone else away from him, lest, in some incoherent phrase, those dread words, parricide or poison, should be pronounced.

At about eleven o'clock he became calmer, and seemed drowsy, but all at once he started up in bed. "Come here!" he cried, whereupon Norbert and Jean hastened to the bedside, and were much startled to find that he had regained his old expression of face; his eyes flashing and his lips trembling as in moments of great excitement. "Pardon me, father!" cried Norbert, falling on his knees. "Pardon me!"

M. de Champdoce gently extended his hand. "My pride was unreasonable and God punished me," said he. "My son, I forgive you."

The young man sobbed aloud. "I renounce my projects, my son. I do not wish you to marry Mademoiselle de Puymandour if you do not love her."

"I have obeyed you, my father," Norbert answered. "She is my wife already."

On hearing this, M. de Champdoce's features expressed the most frightful anguish; he raised his arms as if to drive away a phantom, and, in a hoarse voice, he cried: "Too late! Too late!" Then he fell back on his pillows in convulsions. He was dead!

If it be true, as is asserted, that for the dying the veil of the future is sometimes torn away, then the Duke de Champdoce must have had a frightful vision of mental torture and misery, infamy, and bloodshed.

XII.

REFLECTED by Norbert at that interview in his room at night time, Diane, with death in her heart, turned towards the château de Sauvebourg, following the same road she had so lately traversed palpitating with hope. The apparition of the Duke de Champdoce had terrified her; but, with her, impressions were fleeting, and at home once more, in the seclusion of her own room, she even smiled at her alarm. She had threatened Norbert, but she now realised that it was not he whom she hated, but rather that rival who had robbed her of him—Marie de Puymandour. As this marriage could not be broken off by bringing influence to bear on Norbert, she must change her tactics, and see if on Mademoiselle de Puymandour's side there was not some reason that would suffice to prevent the wedding. With this object Diane commenced an inquiry into her rival's antecedents.

She was busy with her investigations when the Viscount Octave de Mussidan was introduced to her. He was a tall, handsome young man, highly educated and possessed of a considerable fortune. When he was presented to Diane de Sauvebourg, it was, on his side, a case of love—ardent, passionate love at first sight. But with Diane matters were different. Octave was too much unlike Norbert to please her. There was no possible point of comparison between this well-bred, accomplished young nobleman of supremely aristocratic tastes, and that veriest child of nature, "the Champdoce savage." It seemed to Diane that nothing could ever efface Norbert's image from her memory. How well she recollected their first interview—his rustic garments, his shyness, his consternation at having wounded her! She was the first woman he had ever dared look upon—ah! how pleadingly eloquent had been the gaze of his bright blue eyes. At all events, whatever may have been Diane's thoughts, Octave de Mussidan was fairly smitten, and returned home more and more entranced from each visit he paid to Sauvebourg. At last he could control himself no longer, and decided to ask Diane if he might dare to apply to her parents for her hand. Having succeeded in finding himself alone with her, he presented his request in a trembling, respectful voice. Diane was exceedingly surprised, for she had been so absorbed in her own affairs that she had not even suspected his feelings. What should she answer? The viscount's prayer snatched her as it were from dreamland, and brought her face to face with the reality of life. However, she could not give a decided answer on the spot. She must have time for reflection. Hence she replied, with well affected timidity, that on the morrow she would tell him whether he might hope or not. She hesitated all night long. Must she really relinquish Norbert? Must she really abandon all hope of reaping the fruits of the crime she had instigated? The result of her meditations was the letter she intrusted to the widow Rouleau's daughter—the letter in which she had offered to elope with Norbert, and which he had so furiously flung aside at sight of

his father. Diane had been anxiously waiting at the end of the park for her messenger's return, and at sight of her hastened forward, asking, "Have you an answer? what did he say?"

"Nothing—that is, he made a furious gesture and cried out, 'Never! no, never!'"

As it was necessary this girl's suspicions should not be aroused, Diane had sufficient strength to laugh aloud, as she rejoined, "That is just what I thought!"

Françoise seemed inclined to say something more, but Diane hastily dismissed her with the present of a louis. There was to be no more uncertainty, doubt and anguish now, no more struggling, no other hope than that of vengeance. She was thankful now for Octave's love, and said to herself that, once married, she should be free, and able to follow Norbert and his wife to Paris.

When she returned to the château, Octave was there. He questioned her with his eyes, and with a slight grave bow she gave her assent. This consent, she thought, would free her from the past. But, alas! she was mistaken. She forgot her many follies and acts of imprudence, and most especially she was oblivious of that scoundrel Danman. The latter had only felt fully reassured as to the consequences of the crime when he ascertained the duke had absolutely lost his reason, and that the doctor, regarding the case as hopeless, had ceased visiting Champdocé. Then as he heard, in succession, of Norbert's marriage and the duke's death, the horizon seemed fair indeed. All danger was over, and he recalled the important fact that he possessed twenty thousand francs' worth of notes signed by Norbert, which were worth their full amount now that the young man reigned at Champdocé.

Still after all, thought he, twenty thousand francs was but a small sum, quite inadequate to recoup him for all the risk he had incurred, all the suspense and anxiety he had endured; hence why should he not make a bold bid for a larger amount, which would enable him to spend his last years in comfortable retirement. Influenced by this idea, Danman began roaming about Sauvebourg, hoping that he might meet Diane alone, and have a little private conversation with her. For several days he was unsuccessful, but at last one afternoon he perceived Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg walking towards Bivron. He followed her cautiously, and without accosting her as long as she kept to the high road; but as soon as she took a bye-path leading through a small wood he hastened forward and overtook her. "What do you want?" she asked hastily, as soon as she perceived him.

He did not answer at once, but after apologizing for his audacity, he began to congratulate Diane on her marriage, which everyone was now talking about, and which, he said, delighted him, especially as he knew M. de Muséidan to be far superior to—

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked; but as she turned away he had the impudence to restrain her by the corner of her shawl.

"I have something more to add," he replied, "if you will listen; something about—you know what."

"About what, indeed?" she asked, with no effort to conceal her utter contempt.

He smiled, looked round to see that no one was near, and then leaning towards Diane, whispered, "It is about the poison."

She started back as if fearing a serpent's sting. "What do you mean? What do you dare to say?" she asked.

But he had resumed his obsequious air, and relapsed into complaints and recriminations ! What an abominable trick she had played him ! She had stolen his black glass phial. If the truth had been discovered, he would have paid, with his head, for a crime he was innocent of. He had really been made ill by this suspense and mental torture ; he could not sleep at night, and he was haunted by remorse.

"That's enough !" exclaimed Diane, stamping her foot ; "that's enough !"

"Ah, well, mademoiselle, I cannot stay here at Bivron any longer ; I'm too uneasy. I wish to leave for some foreign land."

"Tell me what all this preamble means."

He answered in an obsequious, roundabout, desultory fashion, and Diane had great difficulty in bringing him to the point. At last, however, he confessed he wished for something to console him in his exile—a souvenir—a little help. In fact, he needed a sum which would bring him in a modest yearly income of some three thousand francs.

"I understand," she interrupted, "you wish to make me pay for what you call your devotion."

"Mademoiselle—"

"And you estimate it at sixty thousand francs. That's rather dear, I think."

"Alas ! that is not half what this miserable affair has cost me."

"Nonsense ! I know what to think of your demand."

"Demand," he retorted. "I come to you humbly, hat in hand, asking alms. If I demanded this money, I should approach you in a very different way. I should say : 'I want such and such a sum, or I shall speak.' What have I to lose after all, if everything were told ? Almost nothing. I am a poor man, and I am old. Monsieur Norbert and you, mademoiselle, are the ones who are in danger. You are young, and rich, and noble, and the future is full of happiness for you."

Diane reflected for a moment. "You are talking," she said, "in a very foolish way. When certain charges are made against certain people there must be proofs."

"That's true, mademoiselle ; but how do you know that I haven't proofs ? But if you prefer to purchase them of course you have the best right as well as the first choice, so don't complain." As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a greasy portfolio, and took from it a paper which bore signs of having been crumpled up and then smoothed out again.

Diane gave it a glance, and then stifled an exclamation of mingled rage and fear. She recognized the last note she had sent by the widow Rouleau's daughter to Norbert. "Ah !" she cried, "François has betrayed me—probably because I saved her mother from starvation." Then as the "judge" held out the letter, she tried to snatch it from him fancying he did not distrust her.

But wily Dauman was on his guard. With an ironical gesture he swiftly drew back his hand, and secured the note in his pocket again. "Oh no ! if you please," said he, "this letter isn't that little black phial. Still I will give it to you, with another I have, when you give me what I want. But nothing for nothing ! Mind, if I'm arrested, I prefer to be in good company when I stand in the dock."

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg was in despair. "But I have no money," she cried. "A young girl has no money !"

"But Monsieur Norbert has."

"Go to him, then."

Dauman shook his head. "No," he replied, "I'm not quite such a simpleton. I know Monsieur Norbert; he's his father over again. But you, mademoiselle, can manage him. Besides, you are even more interested in the question than he is."

"Judge!"

"Oh, you'll find that there is something more than the 'judge' concerned. I came to you humbly enough, and you treated me like the dirt under your feet. However, I won't submit to such treatment, as you will find. I never poisoned any-one! But enough recrimination. This is Tuesday. If on Friday, before six o'clock, I don't receive what I want, your father and M. de Mussidan will hear from me. And perhaps you won't be married after all!"

Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg was absolutely aghast at such impudence, and Dauman had disappeared before she could think of a retort calculated to wither him. She understood perfectly well that he was the man to execute his threats, even if he seriously compromised himself, and gained no advantage whatever in doing so. Strong natures do not procrastinate, but try to cope with difficulties as speedily as possible. Thus it was with Diane; but then she had little or no choice in her decision. Indeed her only resource was to apply to Norbert. She of course knew that he would do all in his power to avert danger which threatened himself as much as her; but the idea of applying to him for money—for this is what it amounted to—was odious to her pride. Her pride, indeed! She, a Sauvebourg born, was at the mercy of that vile Dauman, and must do his bidding! Ay, there was no help for it.

Thus instead of continuing her road, she repaired at once to the widow Roubeau's, and addressing Françoise as if she were not acquainted with her perfidy—indeed dissimulation was highly requisite—she bade her go to Champdce, speak to Norbert alone, and tell him that a pressing emergency required that he should come that night to the little park gate at Sauvebourg where she would be waiting for him.

Then she went home. For the rest of the day she endured intolerable agony of mind, and as the hour of rendezvous drew near, her heart beat as it about to burst, and the most terrible doubts assailed her. Would Norbert come? Had Françoise seen him? Suppose he had been away from home! At last it grew dark, and the servants entered the salon with the lamps. Octave de Mussidan was there paying his court as usual: still Diane contrived to slip away, and reached the park gate in breathless haste. Norbert was already waiting for her, and as soon as she appeared, he sprung forward—but then, as if overtaken by a sudden remembrance, he drew back and in a grating, guttural voice exclaimed, "You sent for me, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Duc."

At this title, dropping without thought from her lips, they both started. This title Norbert owed to his father's death, and that death was due to Diane's wish to become a duchess.

She recovered her self-possession first; and at once feeling the need of haste and decision, she began with extreme volubility to explain Dauman's insulting demand, exaggerating all his threats, albeit there was little need of doing so. She fancied that the "judge's" rascality would enrage Norbert, but he had suffered so intensely that he had now become insensible to misfortune. Hence, to Diane's surprise, he merely answered listlessly,

"Don't be troubled, I will see Dauman." So saying, he turned as if anxious to withdraw.

"And you can leave me thus," she asked sadly, "without a word?"

"What can I say, mademoiselle? My dying father forgave me—I forgive you. Adieu."

"Adieu, then, Norbert, we shall see no more of each other. I am about to be married as you have probably heard. Can I resist my parents' will? Besides, what does it matter? Farewell! Remember that there is no one in the world who hopes so earnestly for your happiness as I do."

"Happiness!" cried Norbert. "I happy? Impossible! Can *you* be happy again? If you can, teach me your secret—tell me how to forget, and how to annihilate thought. Perhaps you don't know the dream I had indulged in—a dream of happiness, the memory of which will be the despair of my life. Were I to live a thousand years I could never forget it."

A gleam of triumph, of ferocious joy in fact, came into Diane's eyes as she heard these words. She had dreaded this interview, but to her surprise it had occasioned her little or no painful emotion. "He loves me still," she murmured, "and I no longer love him. My vengeance will be an easy task."

Two days afterwards, Jean, the old Champdoce servant, approached Diane as she was returning home from walking, and handed her a package. She opened it in the seclusion of her room, and found that it contained not merely the two letters Dauman had spoken of, but her entire correspondence with Norbert—more than a hundred missives, all of them lengthy and compromising. At first she thought of destroying them, but on reflection she carefully hid the package, together with the letters she had received from Norbert. "Who knows?" she murmured, "they may be of use some day."

The sixty thousand francs given by Norbert to Dauman as hush money, and the twenty thousand due on the notes of hand, apparently represented the height of the "judge's" ambition, for, a week afterwards, he mysteriously disappeared from the neighbourhood in the company of Françoise, mother Rouleau's daughter. Mother Rouleau went about repeating that Diane had favoured this abominable intrigue; and the old woman who had served as Dauman's housekeeper, declared to the amazement of the villagers that the "judge" had never been a *huissier* at all, but had acquired all his legal knowledge in a convict prison, where he had been detained ten years. Diane was delighted to hear of the elopement of the "judge" and Françoise. She was now at least rid of two of her accomplices. Moreover, Norbert had started for Paris with his wife, and M. de Puymandour repeated on all sides that there was little chance of his daughter, the Duchess de Champdoce, returning to Poitou for a long time to come.

At last, Diane and Octave de Mussidan were married. She had literally enslaved him, so fervent was his passion, and she considered she would be able to mould their life in accordance with her pleasure. All the dark clouds had passed away, and the future seemed to be her own. She planned out a gay existence in Paris, an existence of fêtes and social success, ~~at the same time~~ bearing well in mind the vengeance she intended to wreak on Norbert and Marie de Puymandour.

On her wedding day she seemed radiant, though in point of fact, her apparent delight was only so much bravado. She knew that every eye was fixed upon her as she came out of the church, and she espied many an evil minded look on the faces of the villagers. The happy pair drove at once

to the château de Mussidan, and there a terrible, unexpected misfortune awaited Diane. There indeed, in the drawing-room, stood her husband's secretary, Montlouis, and despite all her courage and audacity, she coloured to the roots of her hair when he was presented to her. He, fortunately, had foreseen this emergency, and having had time to prepare for it, retained an apparently impassive attitude. Still, respectful as was his obeisance, Diane—now Madame de Mussidan—detected, or thought she detected, in his eyes the same threatening expression of ironical contempt as she had so often seen in Danman's. "That man cannot stay here," she thought. Still, however simple, it was withal a dangerous thing to ask her husband to send Montlouis away at once. The wisest course was to defer the secretary's dismissal until some good pretext offered itself. Nor was this occasion long in coming; for Montlouis, zealous enough in Paris, had wonderfully relaxed in punctuality since his arrival at Mussidan. He had, in fact, renewed his connection with the young girl he had courted before going to Paris. M. de Mussidan was by no means pleased with the change in his secretary's conduct, and indeed this sort of thing could not, of course, go on. However, the first blow struck at Diane's newborn happiness did not come from this direction.

She had been married a fortnight or so, and was strolling one afternoon with her husband through the woods, when all at once a dog was heard barking in the underbrush. A moment later and the animal appeared. It was Bruno. The sagacious spaniel immediately recognised Diane, bounded towards her, raised himself on his hind-legs, and, with his fore-paws resting on her breast, tried to lick her face. Diane was inexpressibly agitated. "Help me, Octave!" she gasped.

Her husband at once complied, driving Bruno on one side. "Has the dog frightened you, dear?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered faintly; "I am sick with terror." She was very pale and shuddered at this recognition—shuddered at the thought that it might excite her husband's suspicions.

M. de Mussidan was watching Bruno, who, quite surprised by this unfavourable reception, looked questioningly at Diane with his bright, intelligent eyes. "I'm sure the dog can have meant no harm," exclaimed the viscount.

"No matter. Pray drive him away." And as she spoke, Diane raised her parasol; but the dog, never supposing it to be a threat, fancied that his old friend wished to play with him as formerly, and at once began leaping round her, barking joyfully at every bound.

"Why, this dog knows you, Diane," remarked the viscount.

"Knows me!" As she spoke Bruno licked her hand. "Well, perhaps I may have met him before, but I hardly know where; his memory is better than mine. At all events I don't feel quite at ease. Come, Octave, let us go."

They turned their steps homewards, and Octave de Mussidan would have forgotten the occurrence if Bruno, delighted at having met an old acquaintance, had not obstinately followed Diane. "It's singular," repeated the viscount; "very singular. Look here, my man!" he cried, seeing a peasant at work in a field, "do you know this dog?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"To whom does he belong, pray?"

"Why, to our master, sir; to Monsieur Norbert de Champdore."

On hearing her old lover's name, Diane could not repress a shudder.

"Ah ! to be sure," she exclaimed, speaking with mingled haste and embarrassment. "I remember the dog now. I used to see him at widow Rouleau's; he was always following her daughter about. Oh yes, I know him now. Let's see, his name's Bruno, I think. Here, Bruno ! here !" The dog hastened to her, and she stooped, less to fondle him, however, than to hide her burning face.

Octave and his wife walked home almost without speaking. The young husband was oppressed by a vague doubt, and Diane herself felt much disturbed. She cursed herself for having been so foolish—so cowardly. Why hadn't she recognised the dog at once ? Her conduct had been preposterous. If she had immediately exclaimed, "It's Bruno, the Duke de Champdouce's dog," her husband would have attached no importance to the matter ; but her own folly had transformed this simple incident into a great event. Octave indeed seemed greatly preoccupied, and she even detected a look of suspicion in his eyes. How could she make him forget this unfortunate occurrence ? She took it into her head to feign the greatest fear of dogs, as if that might explain the incident ; having her husband's chained up, and shrieking whenever she perceived one. But the device hardly answered her purpose as she realised ; the very ground of Mussidan seemed to burn her feet ; she longed to fly—to go away, no matter where. It had originally been arranged that the young pair should spend their honeymoon abroad ; but events had decided otherwise, and from various causes they were compelled to linger at Mussidan from week to week. Diane did not dare to openly advocate a prompt departure ; but she exerted all her feminine diplomacy with that end in view, for a presentiment warned her that delay could only bring about a catastrophe. Alas ! her attempts were fruitless, and the catastrophe came.

It was one Thursday, the 26th of October, about four o'clock in the afternoon. Diane had just finished dressing, and was looking out of her bedroom window, when suddenly an excited crowd poured into the court-yard of the chateau. In the rear came a party of peasants, carrying a litter covered with a blood-stained sheet, beneath which the outline of a human form could be distinguished. This appalling sight held Diane spell-bound ; she could not tear herself from the window. That morning her husband and one of his intimate friends, the Baron de Clinchan, had started out on a shooting expedition, accompanied by Montlouis and a keeper named Ludovic. Had some fatality overtaken the party ? Which of the four lay under that sheet ? Was it her husband ? No ; for Octave now appeared, looking pale and haggard, and leaning on the arms of Ludovic and M. de Clinchan. So the dead man, then, was Montlouis, the secretary.

Ah ! it would no longer be necessary for her to intrigue for his dismissal. He would never speak more, this side the grave. Diane felt as if her path had been cleared of a terrible danger ; and anxious to ascertain how the catastrophe had occurred, she darted from her room down the stairs. But, midway, she encountered M. de Clinchan, who was coming up, and who, on perceiving her, caught her by the arm and exclaimed in a strange, harsh voice, "Go back, madame, go back !"

"But in heaven's name what has happened ?" asked Diane, seized with a vague alarm.

"A frightful misfortune. Return to your room, I entreat you ; your husband will be here presently." Then, as she still hesitated, he fairly pushed her upstairs again into her own apartment.

A moment later Octave appeared, and on perceiving his wife held out his arms, drew her to his breast, and burst into sobs.

"He weeps!" exclaimed M. de Clinchan. "He is saved! I thought he would go mad." Then, after many questions and incoherent replies, Madame de Mussidan learnt that her husband had accidentally killed Montlouis whilst aiming at some game.

She fully believed in this fatality. And yet the truth was not told her. Montlouis had really been killed by her, just as the Duke de Champdoce had been. He had died because he knew her secret, and had partially revealed it. In point of fact, the whole party had lunched together in the woods of Bivron, and M. de Mussidan, somewhat exhilarated by a bottle of Sauternes, had begun jesting with his secretary on account of his unpunctuality and frequent absence from the château. Some woman was at the bottom of it, no doubt, added the viscount; and his raillery became so displeasing to Montlouis, that the latter at last made an angry retort. M. de Mussidan immediately fired up, declared he would not allow such escapades to continue, and added that he was surprised his secretary should risk a comfortable position for the sake of some worthless creature. "Not another word, sir," cried Montlouis, who had become ghastly pale. "I forbid you—"

He spoke in such a threatening tone that the viscount fancied he was about to spring upon him, and accordingly he raised his hand to strike his disrespectful secretary. Montlouis avoided the blow; but fairly enraged, and altogether losing his head, he exclaimed, "What right have you to talk in that way; you, who have married another man's mistress? Why do you talk of worthless women, when your wife is but a—"

The word was barely spoken, when the unfortunate young fellow fell to the ground dead. M. de Mussidan in his exasperation had shot him in the heart.

It may be asked why Octave concealed the truth from Diane, why he did not try to discover what truth there was in Montlouis' accusations?

Alas! he loved his wife madly, passionately, and his love made him a coward. He felt he should never have the courage to separate from her; that whatever her faults and frailty might be, his passion would still insist on condonation. In that case, what was the use of enlightenment? Better uncertainty and possibly illusion.

Acquitted by the assize court, thanks to Ludovic's evidence, Octave, however, was not absolved by his conscience. The young girl Montlouis had loved had just given birth to a son, and, turned out of doors by her parents, she was on the verge of dying of destitution, when Octave came to her assistance and, without assigning any reasons for his conduct, undertook to assist her in bringing up her child, who had been christened Paul, after his father. A few days later, M. and Madame de Mussidan left Poitou for Paris, where Diane was more than ever anxious to reside. She had recently engaged a new maid, formerly employed by Marie de Puymandour, and had learnt from this girl that, prior to her marriage, the young Duchess de Champdoce had been in love with George de Croisenois. With this information, Diane considered that her vengeance would prove an easy task.

XIII.

NORBERT's honeymoon was a dreary business indeed, and it could hardly have been otherwise. He did not love his wife, and she, on her side, had not the least sympathy for her husband. On the morrow of his father's death, the young duke had announced his intention of settling in Paris, a plan which his father-in-law, M. de Puymandour, highly approved of, considering that if he remained alone in the country he would be able to play the grand seigneur and manage the Champdoce estates. In fact, with Norbert's approval, he established himself at the château de Champdoce, and fairly slipped into the old duke's shoes.

It was not until the young duchess reached Paris that she fully realised that she was, in sad truth, the most miserable woman in the world. Champdoce had been almost the same as home to her; her eyes had rested on a familiar landscape, friends had come to see her, and whenever she went out she had met people she knew. But here, in the capital, everything seemed strange and hateful. The late Duke de Champdoce, although stingy and hard-listed in all that concerned himself and Norbert, had always acted like a grand seigneur as regards his descendants; and thus the family mansion in Paris intended for their benefit was upholstered and decorated with marvellous luxury. Everything, moreover, was so completely in order, that when Norbert and his wife arrived, they might easily have fancied they were returning to their usual home after a brief absence. Old Jean had become the young duke's adviser, and was able to turn his knowledge of the old traditions to good account. In a fortnight he had tilled kitchen, larder, and ante-rooms with suitable servants; valuable horses were stalled in the stables, and a number of handsome carriages garished the coach-house.

However, despite this princely retinue of lackeys and the general stir and bustle of the household, the young duchess felt inexpressibly sad and lonely. Anguish filled her heart, and she thought with a pang of what her life might have been and what it had become. Alas! she had not even a friend to confide in. Norbert had forbidden her frequenting her old Parisian acquaintances, declaring that they were not sufficiently well born and well-bred. "Moreover," added he, "we are in deep mourning, and cannot begin visiting till next year."

Under these circumstances, alone, deserted as Marie found herself, she could not help thinking of George de Croisenois. Ah! if her father had only been less obdurate, she would have been *his* wife now, and they would have been far away, hiding their happiness in some distant clime—in the sweet south, perhaps, at Florence, Naples, or Sorrento. Yes, George had loved her; but Norbert, alas! was he even her friend?

The young duke was leading one of those senseless lives that so often end in ruin or suicide. Presented at the most fashionable club in Paris by his uncle, the Chevalier de Septvair, he was received with enthusiasm. He bore one of the historical names of France—his fortune, large as it was, was supposed to be three times larger—he was sought after, surrounded, ~~fed~~, and flattered, a legion of sycophants and parasites being anxious to win his favour. His inferior education debarred him from certain successes, hence he sought for easy triumphs, those that are gained by dint of money, eccentricity, and cynicism. He started a racing stable, fought two or three

duels that resulted to his advantage, and showed himself everywhere in the companionship of women without reputation. His days were spent in the saddle and in the fencing gallery, his nights in supping and gambling. His wife seldom even saw him. As a rule, it was daybreak when he returned home, more or less intoxicated, and having generally lost large sums at play. Old Jean, the faithful retainer of the House of Champdoce, sighed, not because his master scattered so lavishly the treasure his father had amassed, but because he was always surrounded by folks of questionable repute. "Think of the name, sir," he said at times, "the name!"

"Oh! what does it matter," answered Norbert, "providing I live fast and die soon?"

The truth is, that the young duke seemed a prey to vertigo. He was like a bark caught in the Maelstrom, whirling round and round, beyond hope of salvation. He rushed on without thinking, or rather, the only thoughts that came to him were thoughts of Diane. Ah! the recollection of others might fade away, but the memory of her still clung to him. Even amid the fumes of wine her image rose before him, luminous and attractive, like a lamp suddenly ignited in the dead of night.

For six months or more, Norbert had been leading this senseless life, when, one fine February afternoon, as he was riding down the Champs Elysees, he noticed a woman nod to him in friendly style. She was seated in a large open barouche, and swathed in furs. He fancied she must be one of the many actresses he knew, and nonchalantly rode towards the carriage; but when only midway, he discovered to his intense surprise that its occupant was Diane—Madame de Mussidan. Still he rode on, and as the carriage had just stopped, he drew his horse up beside it.

Diane seemed as much agitated as himself, and for a few moments neither of them spoke. Their eyes were fixed on each other, and they were as oppressed as if they had felt a presentiment of what Fate had in store for them.

At last, however, Norbert realised he must speak—speak, at any cost, no matter what he said, for the servants were eyeing him inquisitively. "You, madame! here in Paris?" he stammered.

"Yes, Monsieur le Duc."

"Since how long?"

"Oh! we have been installed here, my husband and myself, for a couple of months at least." Artfully enough, she accentuated these words, "my husband."

"Two months!" repeated Norbert, as if lost in a dream.

"Quite so, though I myself can scarcely believe it, for the time has passed so quick." She smiled strangely as she spoke, and a peculiar gleam came into her eyes as she added, "But give me some news of the Duchess de Champdoce. Does she amuse herself in Paris?"

Norbert made a furious gesture. "Oh! the duchess, the duchess!" he grumbled.

Diane interposed. Whilst the duke was speaking, she had disengaged her hand from among her furs, and now, as she held it out to him, she said in a half tender, half jesting tone, "I hope we shall always be friends—good friends. *Au revoir!*"

The coachman, as if the words "*Au revoir*" had been a signal, at once touched up his horses, and the barouche rolled rapidly away.

Norbert had not taken Diane's hand; he had been too bewildered. But

he speedily recovered himself, and spurring his horse, rode swiftly towards the Arc de Triomphe.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with despair gnawing at his heart, "I love her still. I can never love any one but her!"

He made several fruitless efforts to find her barouche again, but all in vain; no doubt she had gone home. "But I will see her again!" he said to himself. "She has not forgotten me—her eyes and voice both said she hadn't." At this moment a gleam of sense darted through his mind. "After all," he murmured, "a woman like her could never forgive certain offences. Her cordiality must have been a snare. Did she not swear to revenge herself?"

Unfortunately he did not long retain this common-sense view of the matter. In fact, the same evening, he asked a friend at his club if he could tell him the Mussidans' address. His friend smiled. "What! Champdce," said he, "are you in love with the charming viscountess as well? Hasn't she made enough victims already?"

"Victims!" ejaculated Norbert in surprise.

"Ay, I know at least of four. To begin with, Octave de Mussidan, her husband; then the youngest of the Sarmeuses; next, Clairin, and then George de Croisenois."

The young duke turned aside in disgust, not daring to carry his inquiries any farther. However, the next day, in the Champs Elysées, he again encountered Madame de Mussidan's carriage; and indeed, day after day, they met in similar fashion, merely exchanging a few words. However, at the beginning of the following week, after a great deal of hesitation, Diane promised Norbert that the next afternoon, at three o'clock, she would alight from her carriage in the Bois, as if desirous of walking, turn into a side avenue they agreed upon, and grant him a short interview there.

She had said at three o'clock; but before two, Norbert was already at the rendezvous, boiling over with impatience and tortured by uncertainty. He asked himself, "Is this really I, waiting for Diane, as I did at Bivron?" How many events had taken place, and how many changes since then! It was not Diane de Sauvebourg who was coming, but the Viscountess de Mussidan, another man's wife. And he himself was married. It was no longer the mere caprice of a father that separated them, but duty, law, and society. Still, in his mad excitement, he asked himself why Diane and he should not set absurd prejudices on one side. Couldn't she leave her husband? couldn't he leave his wife? In the meanwhile, time was passing, and Norbert half feared she might not keep the appointment. He had hardly expressed his anxiety to himself, when he noticed a cab stop some short distance off and a woman hastily alight. It was she. She rapidly approached—crossing an open space, careless of the brambles, so as to reach him the sooner. He bowed low as she drew near; but without a word she took his arm and drew him deeper into the wood. It had rained for several days, and the paths were very muddy, but Madame de Mussidan did not seem to notice it. "Let us go on," she said. "I do not wish any one to see us from the road. I have taken every precaution, my carriage and servants are waiting for me outside the church of St. Philippe du Roule. I am supposed to be at confession; but I came out by a side door and jumped into the first cab. However, I may have been watched and followed. Let us walk farther still."

"You were not so timid once upon a time."

"I was my own mistress then; my reputation was all my fortune, but it

was mine—I had a right to risk it, for if I lost it I only injured myself; but when I married I accepted a sacred deposit—the honour of the man who gave me his name. I must keep it—keep it intact!”

“Say that you love me no longer.”

She gave Norbert one of those frigid looks she excelled in, and slowly answered, “Your memory is failing you, I think. However, I remember a certain letter.”

With an entreating gesture Norbert interrupted her. “Mercy!” he stammered. “Have pity on me! You would have some compassion if you realised the horrors of my punishment. I was blind, mad, foolish then! But never have I so loved you as now.”

A smile curved Diane’s exquisite lips. Norbert told her nothing new; still, she took pleasure in listening to his confession.

“Alas!” she murmured, “what can I say? Nothing but the fatal words, ‘too late!’”

“Diane!”

He tried to take her hand, but she hastily drew it away. “Oh! do not speak like that!” she cried with a wild look; “do not use that name, you have no right to do so. Is it not enough to have trifled with the young girl? Do not dishonour the wife! You must forget me—do you hear? It is to say that, I came here. The other day when I saw you I was not altogether mistress of myself—my heart, which you possessed, went forth to meet you, and I allowed you to see it. But draw no conclusions from my weakness. I said to you, ‘We are friends;’ ’twas folly. We cannot even be friends; we must become strangers.”

Whilst listening, Norbert remembered what his friend had said to him at the club. “You are cruel,” he exclaimed bitterly. “You have been kinder to M. de Sairmeuse, to M. George de Croisenois—”

“What do you mean?” she asked haughtily. “These gentlemen are my husband’s friends; whilst you—” She paused, and then, taking both his hands and fixing her eyes on his, resumed: “You forget that the folks of Bivron said I was your mistress. Do you think this slander has never reached my husband’s ears? One day when your name was mentioned in his presence, I read suspicion and hatred in his eyes. Good God! If he suspected on my return that your hand had just touched mine, he would drive me from his roof like a degraded wretch. Is not the door of our home closed to you for ever?”

“Ah! I am very miserable!”

“And I, what am I? But what is the use of complaining? Be a man; and if in your heart there still lingers one ray of affection for me, prove it by never trying to see me again.”

Thereupon, despite all Norbert’s entreaties and efforts to retain her, she hurried back to the cab, leaving in his heart even a more subtle poison than that she had once intended for his father. She knew what chords vibrated in him, and how to deal with them. She felt certain that before a month was over he would be at her feet, that she would be able to govern him more absolutely than ever, and that even against himself he would assist her in carrying out the infamous scheme of vengeance she had conceived.

Her calculations were correct. After following her about like a shadow for a fortnight, Norbert at last made bold enough to approach her again, one afternoon in the Champs Elysées. She showed her displeasure, but not in so marked a degree as to prevent him from renewing his offence. He accosted her again, she shed tears, and yet he persevered. Her defence

seemed very heroic to Norbert, but by degrees it grew weaker, and at last she granted him one interview, then two more. But what were they? They took place in a church, in a museum, or in the Bois, and they hardly even had time to shake hands.

Still he did not dare complain, for she depicted the danger she incurred as something terrible. At last, after a great deal of hesitation, tears and expostulation, she finished by saying that she had found a means of making their interviews less hazardous. It was—but she dared not say it. However Norbert urged her to speak, and finally she allowed herself to be persuaded. It was that they might meet in comparative safety, if she could only become the friend of the Duchess de Champdoce! This time Norbert felt certain she was altogether an angel, and it was decided that on the very next day he would introduce her to his wife.

XIV.

It was a Wednesday, early in March. Instead of breakfasting in his own room, or at his club with his friends, the Duke de Champdoce had seen fit to join his wife. He was in the best possible humour, gay and smiling, indeed his wife had never seen him so affable since their unfortunate marriage. Madame de Champdoce could not understand the change; it frightened her, for with an innate presentiment, she seemed to divine that it presaged some approaching misfortune. However, as soon as the servants had retired and Norbert found himself alone with his wife, he took hold of her hand and kissed it gallantly. "I have long wished, my dear Marie," said he, "to open my heart to you. Indeed a frank and friendly explanation has become positively necessary."

"An explanation!"

"Good heavens! yes—but don't let the word startle you. I have appeared, I fear, the saddest and most dismal of husbands."

"Indeed!"

"Permit me to explain. Since we came here, we have hardly seen each other. I go out early, and come home very late, and sometimes three days elapse without our exchanging a word."

The young duchess listened with the air of a woman who distrusts her senses. Could this be Norbert accusing himself in this way! "I have no complaint to make," she stammered.

"I know that, Marie. You are a noble and dignified woman. However, you are a woman, and a young one too; so it is impossible that you should not have judged me."

"Indeed, sir, I have not."

"So much the better then. In that case I shall not be obliged to defend or excuse myself. But I wish you to know, Marie, that you are my first thought, even when I am not with you."

He was evidently trying to appear good, kind, and affectionate, but his efforts were useless; for while his words were almost tender, his voice was not even friendly.

"I know my duty, sir," said the duchess.

"Pray, Marie," exclaimed her husband, "let there never be a question of duty between us. You know the causes of your isolation as well as I do. The people who were the friends of Mademoiselle de Puymandour could not be those of the Duchess de Champdoce. You know that."

"And have I ever questioned that decision?"

"No, indeed. Besides our mourning prevents our visiting for four or five months yet."

"Have I asked to go out?"

"Never; which is all the more reason why I should try to make your home more pleasant. I should like to see some one by your side—some one whose society would be congenial to you. Not one of those foolish creatures who are always running after pleasure, and always occupied with dress, but a sensible woman of your own age, and your own rank—a woman you could, in short, make a friend of. But where is such a one to be found? Such connections between young women are at times full of peril, and the happiness or misery of a home depends upon them."

He tripped over his phrases, and caught himself up, like a man who, having to express a difficult idea, turns it round and round in every possible way. "However," he at last resumed, more glibly, "after thinking about this for a long time, and giving it all my attention, I really do fancy I have discovered the person I dreamt of for you. I met her recently at the house of Madame d'Arlange, who sang her praises to me, and I hope to present her to you to-day."

"Here?"

"Of course. What is there curious about it? Besides this lady is not altogether a stranger to us. She comes from Poitou, from our own part, and in fact, you know her by sight." He coloured as he spoke, and knowing it, he bent over the fire as he added: "Do you remember Mademoiselle de Sauvebourg?"

"Mademoiselle Diane, do you mean?"

"Precisely." And Norbert, as may be imagined, waited right anxiously for his wife's answer.

"Oh! I saw very little of her. Her father and mine were not over pleased with each other. The Marquis de Sauvebourg regarded us as too insignificant to—"

"Ah, well!" rejoined Norbert, well pleased, for his wife's answer showed she had no knowledge of the past, no suspicion even of his intrigue with Diane, "ah, well! I hope that the daughter will repair her father's faults. She married just after we did, and her husband is the Viscount Octave de Mussidan. In short, she is coming to call on you to day, and I have told your servants you would receive."

Madame de Champdouce made no rejoinder. She lacked experience no doubt, but she was not deficient of that penetration which seems to belong naturally to women. She had noticed Norbert's embarrassment, and reflected, asking herself what it meant. The pause that ensued, was already growing embarrassing, when carriage wheels were heard grating on the sand in the court-yard. The next moment a servant entered and announced that Madame de Mussidan was in the salon.

Norbert eagerly rose, and taking his wife's arm, exclaimed, "Come Marie, come!—it is she!"

It was only after considerable hesitation that Diane had decided on this strange and audacious step, in this visit paid in defiance of all ideas of social propriety. She exposed herself, as she well knew, to the most painful humiliations. For a minute or so, which seemed to her a century, so great was her anxiety as to the reception in store for her on the part of Norbert's wife, did Diane remain alone in the drawing-room, and then the door opened and the duke and duchess appeared. Diane's heart was beat-

ing pit-a-pat, and yet with a winning smile, and charming grace, she bowed to the young duchess, gaily excusing herself for her importunity. "She had not been able," she said, "to resist the desire of seeing her old neighbour, now that she was so near; and so in disregard of all *convenances*, for which she trusted the duchess would forgive her, she had ventured to call so that they might talk together about Bivron, Champdece, and all that beautiful country where she was born, and which she loved so dearly."

The duchess listened in silence to this flow of words. She had bowed with great coldness, and her face expressed more clearly, perhaps, than is customary in good society, the surprise this visit caused her.

Even a more perfectly self-possessed person than Diane might have been disconcerted. But present annoyance was so small in comparison to the advantages she hoped to reap, so that she appealed to all the resources of her wit and skill.

Norbert meanwhile wandered up and down the room feeling none too comfortable in the contemptible rôle he had accepted. However, as soon as he fancied that the ice was broken, and that the two women were conversing amicably, he left them, uncertain whether he ought to feel glad or sorry at the success of this unworthy comedy.

The task was more difficult than he supposed. After what Norbert had told her of his wife, Madame de Mussidan had fancied she would be received by the duchess as if she were an angel come down from heaven to visit and console a prisoner. She expected to find a simple, artless sort of woman, who, on her first visit, would throw her arms round her neck, and afterwards entirely abandon herself to her influence. But she speedily realised that she must be most cautious and skilful, if she wished to win the duchess's confidence. Still this unexpected difficulty rather exhilarated Diane than discouraged her, and such, when she chose, were her powers of fascination, that when she left, the first step was achieved.

That same evening, Madame de Champdece said to her husband: "I think that the countess is an excellent woman!"

"Excellent is just the right word," answered Norbert. "All Bivron wept when she left; she was the providence of the poor."

He was flattered by Diane's success. For had she not displayed all this address for his sake—were not her efforts a fresh proof of the sincerity of her passion! However, his satisfaction diminished considerably the next day, when he saw Madame de Mussidan in the Champs Elysées. She looked sad and preoccupied. "What has gone wrong?" he asked.

"I—I repeat bitterly having yielded to my own heart and your entreaties. Alas! we have been terribly imprudent."

"We imprudent? And how?"

"Norbert, your wife suspects something."

"She—impossible! She sang your praises after your departure."

"If that is the case, she is cleverer than I supposed, for she is able to conceal her suspicions, and has determined to verify them."

Diane's tone was so serious, that Norbert was positively startled.

"What is to be done, then?" he asked. "What can we do?"

"It would be best to give up seeing each other."

"Never! never!"

"Let me think, then; and in the meantime, be prudent. Yes, in the name of heaven be prudent."

The result of Diane's reflections and artful advice was that Norbert entirely changed his mode of life. No more club bouts, or suppers, or nights spent

in gambling and drinking. He went about with his wife in the daytime, and often spent his evenings at home. His friends charged him with having become a model husband. This great change did not take place without many an inward revolt on his part. He was humiliated by the constant hypocrisy he was condemned to, but then Diane's small white hand, apparently so slender and so frail, was yet as firm as steel.

"You *must* live like this," she said, in reply to his complaints—"first, because it must be so, and next, because I wish it. On your present conduct all our future security depends. I wish Madame de Champdoce to feel that happiness entered her doors with my introduction to her."

What could be said in reply to this? Norbert was more in love than ever, and a terrible fear froze every objection upon his lips. "If I displeased her," he thought, "she wouldn't hesitate to throw me over!" and so he obeyed her, hard as it was to do so.

After remaining for a long time on the defensive, the duchess yielded at length to the charms of the friendship which seemed so frankly offered her, and finished by abandoning herself absolutely to her mortal enemy. Finally, she had not a secret from her; and one day, after many long and confidential conversations with Diane, she confessed, amid tears and blushes, her one girlish love—the memory of which remained in her heart like some precious perfume. She even spoke of George de Croisenois by name. That day Diane was thrilled with joy. "I have her at last," she thought; "my vengeance is at hand!"

The two young women were now constantly together. In fact, they seemed like two fond sisters. Norbert, however, was scarcely pleased thereat; for Diane's intimacy with his wife had by no means conduced to that liberty of intercourse he had desired and anticipated. In fact, now that Madame de Musidan went daily to the Hôtel de Champdoce, Norbert saw her even less than before. Sometimes weeks elapsed without their seeing each other alone for a single moment, and she devised everything so artfully that his wife always rose up, as it were, between him and her—just as in the pantomimes, when the clown, wishing to kiss Columbine, always finds Harlequin there to prevent him. At times Norbert waxed wrathful; but Diane always had reasons, either good or bad ones, to close his lips with. At times she ridiculed him mercilessly, and then at others she assumed her grand air and said, "In heaven's name, what did you expect? What infamy did you suppose me capable of?"

Norbert was, in fact, managed by Diane precisely as if he had been a child or a fool. He knew it and realised it fully. If he could only have followed her about as before! But she was always guarded in the Bois or at the races, in fact, wherever she went, by some *cavaliere servente* riding beside her carriage—now by M. de Sairmeuse, now by M. de Clairin, and most frequently by George de Croisenois. These men were one and all disagreeable to Norbert, and De Croisenois especially so; for he looked upon him as impertinent and absurd, in which opinion he was altogether wrong.

At twenty-five, the Marquis de Croisenois was one of the cleverest and most witty men in Parisian society, and his high reputation, contrary to what often happens, was well deserved. Many persons were envious of him, but he had no enemies. He was greatly esteemed, for his honour and probity were beyond question. Moreover, his character was not destitute of certain chivalric, adventurous traits. However, Norbert could not brook him, and in his mad jealousy often asked, "I should like to know what you see in this impertinent fop to have him about you so much?"

To which she invariably replied, with an equivocal smile, "You are too curious—-you will know some day."

Ah ! if Norbert had been less carried away by his passion, if he had studied Diane's tone of voice when she spoke to him, if he had investigated her conduct ! But no, love had blinded him ; he saw, he divined nothing.

In the meanwhile, not a day passed without some conversation between Diane and the duchess about Croisenois ; and the viscountess had artfully accustomed Marie to look certain probabilities, or rather, possibilities, in the face, from the mere idea of which, a few months before, she would have shrunk with horror. This point gained, Madame de Mussidan now considered it advisable to bring the old lovers once more together ; an unexpected meeting, thought she, would have more effect than all her insinuations. Accordingly, one day when Madame de Champdoce called for her friend, she was asked to wait in the salon for a few minutes. She entered, and found herself face to face with the Marquis de Croisenois.

An exclamation of surprise escaped them both as they recognised each other, and they turned very pale. But the emotion of the duchess was such, that she sank half fainting on to a chair near the door. M. de Croisenois was scarcely less moved ; for he had loved Marie de l'nymandour deeply and truly, and was not yet consoled. "I had faith in you," he murmured, hardly knowing what he said ; "but you forgot me."

"You do not believe what you say," answered the duchess proudly. But a moment afterwards, unconscious of the gravity of her words, she added, "What could I do ? I obeyed my father. I was weak, no doubt ; but I have forgotten nothing."

Behind the door Madame de Mussidan was crouching and listening, and as she heard these words, her eyes glittered with infernal triumph. She said to herself that an interview that commenced like this was not likely to be the last one. She was not mistaken ; for she soon discovered that George and the duchess understood each other enough to meet regularly at her house. However, she did not appear to notice it. She waited calmly ; things were proceeding as she wished, and sooner or later the mine she had prepared must surely explode with terrible force and effect.

XV.

SEPTEMBER had come round, and although the weather was atrocious, the young Duke de Champdoce, accompanied by his faithful Jean, was sojourning at Maisons, where his racing stable was installed. The truth is, that having had a tiff with Diane, he wished to try the effect of absence in reducing her to submission, having, indeed, heard say that absence is like the wind that fans a fire and extinguishes a candle.

Norbert had been at Maisons a couple of days, and was already growing very anxious at not having heard from Madame de Mussidan, when one evening, as he came in from a last look at his horses, he was told that a man wished to see him. He found this man to be a poor old fellow, well known in the place, who lived partially on the alms he received and the friends he was intrusted with.

"Did you wish to see me ?" asked the duke.

The old fellow half drew a letter from his pocket, and with a knowing wink replied, "This is for you."

"Very well—give it to me."

"But I was told, sir, to wait until you were alone, for—"

"Never mind. Make haste!"

"If you say so, I suppose I must."

Norbert took it for granted that this letter came from Diane, so tossing the man a louis, he hurried with the letter to the nearest stable lamp. But the direction was not in the aristocratic, delicate handwriting of the Countess de Mussidan. Indeed, Champdoco was written with two *s's* instead of with a *c*. "Who the deuce could have sent me this?" thought Norbert. However, he broke the seal.

The paper was soiled and greasy, and as coarse as the envelope. The writing was atrocious, and the mistakes in spelling innumerable. The mis-sive ran as follows: "Sir, it gives me pain to tell you the truth; but I can't help it, for I must relieve my conscience. I cannot endure to see a woman, without heart or honour, persistently deceiving a man like yourself. I write therefore to tell you that your wife betrays you, and daily laughs at you. You may believe me, for I am an honest woman; and it is easy, too, for you to satisfy yourself that I don't lie. Conceal yourself this very evening, from half-past ten to eleven, in any place where you can see the small door in your garden wall, and you will certainly see the lover arrive. He has had a key for a long time. The hour for the rendezvous is well chosen, for there won't be a servant in the house. But I implore you, sir, don't be severe; for I would not do your wife any harm on any consideration.

"FROM ONE WHO KNOWS."

Norbert read this infamous letter at one glance. The blood rushed to his brain, and he gave vent to a roar of rage. All the servants rushed towards him. "That man!" he cried, "where's that man?"

"What man?"

"The fellow who brought me this—this letter. Run after him. Bring him here instantly."

In a minute or two the man appeared, dragged along by two stalwart grooms. "I didn't steal it," he cried; "it was given me. I'm ready to restore it!" He spoke of the louis tossed to him by Norbert; for the largeness of the sum had awakened his doubts as to its having been intended for him.

"Keep the money," said the duke. "I gave it to you. But answer my question. Who gave you this letter?"

"A man I don't know, sir," replied the old fellow trembling.

"Is that really true?" asked Norbert.

"Oh! may my next pipe poison me if I am lying. It was about four o'clock when he jumped out of a cab near the bridge. I was passing by, and he stopped me and said, 'Do you see this letter? At half-past seven just take it to the Duke de Champdoco, in the house at the stables on the forest road.' 'Yes, I know the place,' says I; and then he put the letter and a five-franc piece into my hand, jumped into the cab again, and drove off."

"What was he like?" asked Norbert.

"Like? Well, sir, I don't know. He had a gold watch-chain across his waistcoat; but I didn't notice anything else. He wasn't old, nor young, nor short, nor tall—"

"Enough! You may go."

At this moment Norbert's anger was solely directed against the writer of this anonymous letter. He did not place the smallest belief in the charges against his wife; for if he did not love her, he respected her.

"My wife," he said, "is an honest woman, and this must come from some servant she has discharged, and who takes this mode of revenge."

However, he re-perused the note, and on reflection it seemed to him that the bad spelling was somewhat forced. Moreover, the mention that there wouldn't be a servant in the house struck him as especially singular. Anxious for information on the point, he summoned Jean. "Is it true," he asked, "that there won't be any of the servants at the house in Paris to-night?"

"Doesn't Monsieur le Duc remember? It's the head coachman's wedding to-day, and madame was kind enough to say she would not deprive any one of the ball, and that if the concierge and his wife remained at home as usual that would do."

"Ah, yes, I remember now," said Norbert with affected calmness.

But in point of fact, doubt had now crept into his mind, and as we know suspicion cannot be reasoned away. "After all," thought Norbert, "why shouldn't my wife betray me? I believe her to be virtuous, and attached to her duties; but all husbands who are deceived undoubtedly believe the same. Why shouldn't I profit by this advice? Why shouldn't I see for myself?—No," he continued, "I will not descend to such baseness. I should be as vile as the person who wrote this letter, if I played the spy, as she suggests."

He looked up and saw that all the stablemen were watching him with intense curiosity. "Go to your work!" he cried, angrily; "put out your lanterns and shut the windows."

He thought the men looked sneeringly at him, and intensely aggravated, he at once made up his mind. He took out his watch. It was eight o'clock; he had just time to get to Paris, he thought. Accordingly he summoned Jean once more. With this devoted servant there was no need of dissimulation. "I must go to Paris at once, Jean," said Norbert.

The old man shook his head sadly. "On account of that letter?" he asked, respectfully.

"Yes, on account of this letter."

"Some one has made charges against my mistress."

"How do you know that?" asked Norbert.

"It was easy enough to guess, sir."

"Well, quick, a change of clothes for me. Have horses put to the carriage, drive to the club, I will go on foot."

"It can't be done like that, sir," said Jean gravely; "the other servants may have the same idea as myself. You ought to go without anyone knowing it. Let the servants here suppose you have never left Maisons. I will take a horse from the small stable, secretly saddle him, lead him across the bridge, and you can come and join me there."

"Very well; but there is no time to lose."

Jean hurried away, and Norbert heard him say to an under valet, "Put some cold meat on the table, the duke says he's famished."

Entering his bedroom M. de Champdece donned an overcoat and riding boots, and slipped a loaded revolver into his pocket. The night was very dark, a fine, icy rain was falling, and the roads were almost impassible. However, at the appointed spot he found the old valet with the horse. Norbert at once leaped into the saddle, exclaiming, "No one saw me leave."

"Nor me either," answered the faithful servant. "I shall go back and attend to things just as if you were at supper. But in three hours from

now I shall be in that wine shop on the left. When you return just touch the window lightly with the handle of your whip."

The horse clamped the bit impatiently, Norbert was off like the wind. Jean had made a wise choice, for the animal stretched himself out and took the muddy road at an even, regular pace. Still Norbert, by this time in a state of great excitement, applied the spurs.

As he reached the Faubourg St. Germain, he had a new idea. Supposing some of his club friends had sent him this letter as a practical joke? In that case, they would of course be watching for him, and would keep him on the *qui vive* near that gate for two hours, and then suddenly appear and overwhelm him with ridicule. This fear made him prudent. What was he to do with his horse? The wine shops were still open; he might perhaps go into one, and find some man who would take charge of the animal. Whilst he was hesitating, he perceived a soldier tramping along on his way, probably to his barracks. "Eh, my good fellow," asked Norbert, "are you inclined to earn twenty francs?"

"Of course I am, if it's honestly and in no way contrary to the regulations of the service."

"It's only to hold my horse and walk him up and down, while I pay a visit near here."

"Oh, all right, I can stay out a couple of hours more."

Norbert thereupon alighted, told the soldier where to wait for him, and went rapidly on his way. To make sure of everything, for he still dreaded a practical joke, he took a circuitous route to the Rue Barbet de Jouy where the side gate of the Champs-Élysées grounds was situated. Almost in front of it on the other side of the way was the *porte-cochère* of an aristocratic mansion, and Norbert slipped into a dark corner and watched. Previously, however, he had carefully explored the street from one end to the other, for it is a very short street, and had ascertained that it was utterly deserted. This necessarily put an end to all idea of a mystification, and so he determined he would wait till midnight, and if by that time no one had come he would recognize his wife's innocence, and retire.

Three windows on the second floor were faintly lighted; and these were precisely those of his wife's sleeping room. Norbert looked at them and reflected. "She is not the kind of woman," he said to himself, "who would receive a lover! No, no! it is impossible." And by degrees he began to think of the manner in which he behaved to his wife. Had he nothing to reproach himself with? Two days after their marriage he had virtually abandoned her; and if during the last few months he had condescended to show her any affection, she owed it, poor thing, to the caprice of another woman—who bestowed it upon her like alms to the starving. Even if a man were with her, what right had he to interfere? The law, of course, gave him every right, but his conscience accorded him none.

He stood against the wall, motionless as the stone itself. He was chilled, and it seemed to him that life and thought were both fading away. How long had he been there—one hour or six? He had no idea. He pulled out his watch, but it was so dark that he could not see the hands. However, just at that moment the clock of the Invalides struck a half-hour—What half hour was it? He had already decided to depart, when suddenly he heard a light footfall at the end of the street. It was a man's step plainly enough, but not the decided tread of some dweller in the street returning home. It was timid, undecided, furtive so to say. Could this really be

the tread of his wife's lover? Soon he distinguished a shadow gliding along the garden wall over the way. Then came a pause. The shadow halted, moved on again, Norbert heard a sound he could not understand, and finally all became quiet once more. The shadow had disappeared.

It seemed evident to Norbert that the man had entered the garden, and yet he would gladly have doubted still. "It may be a burglar," he thought; "but a burglar would naturally have accomplices. This man might have come to see some servant; but then all the servants were away."

Meanwhile, he had not taken his eyes from the windows of his wife's room. All at once the light became brighter; the shade of the lamp had been taken off, or a candle had been lighted. Yes, it was a candle, for he saw it carried across the windows of the landing and then across those of the grand staircase; ay, he must accept the truth. A lover had certainly entered the house, had given some preconcerted signal, and the duchess was going forward to meet him. Norbert's blood boiled in his veins, the chilly fog now seemed to him like the fumes of a brazier. How could he punish the wretches who thus outraged his honour, what punishment could he devise, adequate for the crime? All at once, he uttered an exclamation. An infernal idea had just crossed his mind, and he accepted it as a divine inspiration. He ran to the door, forced the lock, and rushed into the garden.

XVI.

THE person who penned that anonymous letter was only too well informed. The Duchess de Champloce was expecting George de Croisenois—it was the first time. Alas! the poor woman had ended by falling into the snare set for her by the woman whom she believed to be her most devoted friend.

The evening before she had been for a short time in Madame de Mussidan's drawing room, alone with George. She had been moved by his passion, and could not resist his ardent words. Finally she lost her head, and promised the rendezvous he begged for on his knees. "Ah well," she said, "so be it, then. Come to-morrow night, at half-past ten, to the little garden gate—it will be merely pushed to, kept closed by a stone—push it open, and when you are inside the garden, warn me by clapping your hands together several times."

These words had been overheard by Diane (as usual listening at the key-hole), and as she esteemed her friend sufficiently to know that swift repentance would follow these mad words, she remained with her the whole evening, dined with her the next day, and did not leave her to herself till the appointed hour was near at hand. It was only when she was at last left alone that the duchess fully realized her imprudence, and the enormity of her fault. She repented of her weakness, and would have given anything to have been able to retract that fatal promise. But, alas! the hour was nigh. Still, after all there was one means of safety left, she might go down and bolt the garden door. Seized with this idea, she started up; but, it was too late—at that very moment Croisenois' signal was heard! Poor woman! Those handclaps, which announced her lover, sounded in her ears like a death-knell. She stooped to light a candle at the fire; but her hand shook to such a degree that the heated wax blazed, but the wick did not light. She fancied that Croisenois was still in the

garden as she had not replied to his signal. It had not occurred to her that he had dared to open the hall door. Hence she intended going down at once and entreat him to retire without entering the house. But she counted without her host. In such an artless, natural way that her infernal purpose could not be guessed, Diane had allowed Croisenois to know that the Champdoce mansion would be quite deserted that night. He had ascertained, moreover, from other sources, that the duke was at Maisons, and that all the servants were dancing and making merry at a wedding. Accordingly George did not hesitate; he entered the house and went softly up the stairs, so that when the duchess, with the lighted candle in her hand, reached the landing, she found herself face to face with her lover, whose footfall she had not even heard. She started back with a cry of despair. "Fly!" she stammered; "fly, or we are lost!"

But he did not seem to hear; and the duchess drew still further back — back, indeed, into her room, whilst he still followed her, after pushing to the door behind him.

But the brief moment this required had sufficed to bring Mario to her senses. "If I allow him to speak," she thought, "if he once suspects my miserable weakness, I am lost!"

"You must depart at once," she said. "I was mad yesterday. You are too noble and too generous not to realise that I am speaking the truth when I tell you that my reason has returned to me. Listen to me—my frankness will convince you that I love you."

De Croisenois uttered an exclamation of joy.

"Yes," continued Marie, "to become your wife I would gladly abandon everything. But it cannot be. I love you, George, but the voice of duty speaks more loudly than that of love. Maybe I shall die of grief; but, at all events, I shall die without remorse, without a stain on my honour. Adieu!"

The marquis could not consent to being dismissed like this.

"Go!" repeated the duchess, as severely as she could; "go at once!" And as he did not move she continued:

"If you love me, my honour should be as dear to you as your own. Withdraw, and never try to see me again. Our present peril shows me clearly that we never ought to see each other. I am the Duchess de Champdoce, and must keep the name I bear intact and pure. I will neither deceive nor betray."

"Why did you speak of deception?" he asked. "No doubt I despise the woman who smiles at the husband she betrays; but I also say that she is noble and courageous who boldly abandons everything to follow the fortunes of the man she loves. Leave your name here, Mario, your title, your fortune, and your luxury, and fly with me."

"I love you too much, George," she answered softly, "to ruin your future. The day would come when you would regret your abnegation. A dishonoured woman must be a heavy burden."

George de Croisenois misunderstood her. "Ah! you doubt me!" he exclaimed, "I see. You think I might abandon you! Ah! Mario, never. I swear it, never! But stay—you need, perhaps, some tie that shall bind us together irrevocably for all time to come. You will be dishonoured, you say. Very well, I will dishonour myself. To-night, at the club, I will cheat at cards, let myself be detected, and go out with lowered head. Folks will call me a thief. Ah! I would accept dishonour gladly, if to-morrow you would but fly with me to any distant land you choose!"

"I must not listen to you," she cried. "It is too late now—impossible—impossible!"

"Impossible! and why?"

"Ah, George!" she sobbed; "because—if you know!"

He dared to clasp her round the waist, and was about to press his lips on her brow, when all at once he felt Marie totter, whilst she extended one arm towards the door.

The door was open, and there, motionless on the threshold, stood Norbert de Champdoce. The marquis realised at once what a terrible, irreparable situation he had created by his own impetuosity. "Come no nearer!" he cried in a threatening voice. "No nearer!"

What! at the dead of night, unarmed, he was in another man's house, with his arm round the waist of that other man's wife, and yet he dared to threaten! A sardonic laugh from Norbert recalled him to the truth, and made him realise the folly of his words.

He carried Madame de Champdoce to a sofa and laid her on it. She was almost unconscious, but for one instant she opened her eyes, and, dim as they were, George read therein love and forgiveness for the man who had blasted her happiness forever. This look restored his *sang froid*, and he turned to Norbert.

"Whatever appearances may be," he began, "you have here but one person to punish—not even the shadow of a suspicion should rest on your wife. It was without her knowledge—without any encouragement from her—that I dared to enter your house, knowing all the servants to be away."

Norbert did not speak. He also needed to collect himself. He knew when he ascended the stairs that he was about to surprise the duchess with a lover; but he could not foresee that this lover was precisely the man whom he hated most in the world. When he saw Croisenois, it was with difficulty that he resisted the temptation of springing at his throat.

This man, whom he had suspected of stealing Diane's heart, had now robbed him of his wife. He was silent, simply because his mind was in such confusion that he did not dare to speak. If he seemed as cold and rigid as marble, when all the flames of hell rioted in his heart, it was because he could not move—a physical impossibility prevented him. With all this appearance of impassibility, Norbert was mad—absolutely mad.

Meanwhile Croisenois continued, with his arms folded across his breast, "I had just come here, sir," he said, "when you arrived. Would to God you had only heard our conversation from the beginning—you would then realise all the nobility and grandeur of this lady's character. My offence is very great, I admit; but I hold myself at your orders, and am ready to give you all the satisfaction you desire."

As these last words fell from the marquis's lips, Norbert seemed to awake from a dream. With a heavy, uncertain step he entered the room, shut all the doors, and put the keys in his pocket. Then taking up his stand near the mantelpiece, with Croisenois in front of him, he exclaimed, "If I understand you aright, you propose a duel. That is to say, having dishonoured me to-night, you propose to kill me to-morrow; you are too kind."

"Sir!"

"Allow me: I am perhaps a child, as you were once good enough to say to Madame de Mussidan; but at least I've sufficient experience to know that it is foolish to abandon advantages. In the game you have been playing, sir, a man risks his life—and you have lost, I think."

Croisenois bowed mechanically. The mention of Madame de Mussidan's

name came to him as a revelation of Norbert's true feelings. "I am a dead man!" he thought, as he looked at the duchess, "and not on your account, poor Marie! but for a very different woman."

In the meanwhile Norbert went on, becoming more excited by the sound of his own voice: "What do I care for a duel? I come to my own house in the middle of the night, I am armed, and I blow out your brains—the law sustains me—" As he spoke, he produced his revolver and deliberately took aim at George.

This was a terrible moment, but Croisenois did not flinch. However, as Norbert did not pull the trigger, the suspense became well nigh intolerable to him. "Fire!" he cried. "Fire!"

"No!" said Norbert coldly. "On reflection, I've decided that your body would be a great inconvenience to me!"

"My patience has its limits, sir; what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to kill you!" answered the duke, in such a tone of concentrated rage and hatred that George shuddered; "but not with a bullet. It is said that blood washes mud away. It's false. If all yours were shed, the spot on my escutcheon would still be there. One of us must disappear from the face of the globe in such a way that not a trace is left."

"Very well, sir; point out the means."

"I know a way," said Norbert, "if I were sure that no human being suspects your presence here to-night."

"No one can know it, sir. I swear it."

"In that case," resumed the duke, "instead of taking advantage of my rights, which justified me in killing you, I consent to risk my life against yours."

Croisenois, with difficulty, repressed a sigh of relief. "I am at your orders, as I told you before," he said.

"I hear and understand; but it will be no ordinary combat, in broad daylight, with seconds—"

"We will meet wherever you choose, sir."

"Very well. That being the case, we will fight with swords, this very moment, in the garden."

The marquis glanced towards the windows.

"You probably think that the night is too dark for us to see to fight," observed Norbert.

"That's true."

"You need not be troubled, however; there will be light enough to die—for one of us must die—yon understand me?"

"I understand. Let us go down at once."

Norbert shook his head. "You are in too much hurry," said he; "you have not allowed me to fix my conditions."

"Speak, sir."

"At the end of the garden there is a vacant place, which is so damp that nothing is grown there, and no one ever goes there. Nevertheless, there I shall take you. We shall each of us take a pickaxe and a spade, and in very little time we can dig a hole deep enough to bury the one who is killed. When this is done, we will lay down our spades and take our swords, and fight till one or the other drops. The one who is left standing must finish the other, if he is not quite dead, and then roll him into the pit and cover him over with earth."

"Never!" exclaimed Croisenois; "never will I accept such conditions."

"Take care, then!" said Norbert; "I shall use my rights. In four

minutes that clock strikes eleven—if at the first stroke you don't consent, I fire."

The muzzle of the revolver was but twelve inches from Croisenois' breast, the finger of a mortal enemy was on the trigger, and yet he was quite insensible to this danger, though it came after so many emotions. He merely understood that he had four minutes to reflect and deliberate. The events of the last half hour had succeeded each other with such rapidity that they seemed almost incredible, so incoherent and absurd, that he wondered if he were not suffering from some odious nightmare.

"You have only two minutes left," said Norbert suddenly.

Croisenois started. His mind had been a thousand leagues from his present position. He glanced at Norbert, and then at Marie, who was still extended on the couch. She might have been regarded as dead, but for the hysterical sobs which shook her from head to foot at long, irregular intervals. To leave her in this state, without aid of any kind, seemed absolutely barbarous; but Croisenois clearly realised that any indication of compassion on his part would merely be looked upon as a new insult.

"God have pity on us," he said to himself; "we are at the mercy of a madman!" And he asked himself with a shudder what would become of this woman he loved so deeply, were he now to die. "For her sake," he thought, "I must kill this man, or her life will be one slow agony—and I will kill him, too."

"I accept!" he cried, in a loud voice.

It was time enough, for the light vibration which precedes the striking of a clock was just heard, and then came the first stroke.

"Thank you, sir," said Norbert coldly.

But Croisenois had now determined to sell his life dearly, if not for his own sake, at least for Marie's. "Yes, I accept," he said; "but I, too, have conditions to make."

"It was decided—"

"Allow me to explain. We are about to fight in your garden, without witnesses and in the dark. We two are to dig a grave, I believe, and the one who survives is to bury the other; am I right? But how can you be sure that this will be the end—that the earth will retain our secret?"

Norbert shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know, and you don't care," resumed Croisenois, violently. "But I know, and I care—and if it came to pass that some day our secret were discovered—"

"Ah!"

"The survivor—be that survivor you or me—would be accused of murder. He would be arrested, imprisoned, dragged, into a court of justice, condemned, and sent to the galleys or the guillotine."

"Unquestionably."

"You say 'unquestionably,' and yet you think that I would consent to run such a risk as that?"

"Such are the risks, certainly," answered Norbert. "but these very risks are the best possible guarantee that should you kill me, you would conceal my death as I wish to have it concealed."

"You must rely on my word, sir."

"Ah! take care, or you will force me to think you afraid."

"And I am afraid of being accused of murder."

"But it is a danger I am exposed to as well as yourself."

Croisenois was fully determined not to yield. "You say our chances are equal," he rejoined. "Is that so? If I disappear, who on earth would dream of looking for my body here? You are in your own home, you can take every imaginable precaution. But if I kill you, what then? Can I ask the Duchess de Champdouce to assist me? Will she not be herself under suspicion? Shall she say to her gardeners—when all Paris is on the *qui vive* in reference to your disappearance, 'Take care not to disturb the ground at the end of the garden?'"

Norbert now suddenly remembered the anonymous letter he had received, and realized that whoever wrote it possessed his secret, and might noise it about. "What have you to propose then?" he asked.

"Simply, that each of us, without referring in any way to the causes of our duel, shall write down the conditions, with an acceptance of them signed in full."

"Very well; but hasten."

Thereupon the two adversaries drew up the *procès-verbaux* agreed upon, and moreover, again at Croisenois' suggestion, they each penned two short notes dated from abroad, so that the survivor might have them posted with the view of misleading any inquiry, or search that might follow the disappearance of either of them.

When this was done, Norbert rose. "One word more," said he. "A soldier is just now leading my horse up and down the Esplanade des Invalides—the horse on which I came here. If you kill me, go and fetch this horse, and give the man twenty francs—I promised them to him."

"Very well."

"Now let us go down."

They left the room, but as Norbert stepped back to allow Croisenois to pass before him, he felt himself pulled by his coat-tails. He turned and found that the duchess, too weak to stand, had dragged herself to him on her knees. Poor woman! she had heard everything, and with clasped hands, and in an almost inaudible voice, she pleaded in agonized entreaty: "Mercy! Norbert—I am innocent. I swear to you that I am innocent! You never loved me! Why do you fight? Mercy! To-morrow I swear to you I will enter a convent—you shall never see my face again. Mercy!"

"Pray God, madame, that your lover may kill me—that is your only hope. Then you will be free—"

As he disengaged himself with brutal violence, the poor woman fell back on the floor, and fainted away.

XVII.

"TWENTY times during that last quarter of an hour had Norbert de Champdouce been on the point of bursting into a furious passion, but twenty times he had been restrained by his excessive vanity. Now, however, he could contain himself no longer; when he left his wife's room, he evinced savage earnestness and impatient ferocity. As he lighted Croisenois down the grand staircase, he over and over again exclaimed, "Make haste, make haste." It needed very little to disconcert his plans—merely a servant returning earlier than the others.

When they reached the ground floor Norbert took Croisenois into a large room which looked as if it belonged to an arsenal, so crowded was it with

weapons of every epoch, and every kind. "I think we shall find what we need here," he said in a tone of sardonic raillery, and jumping on to the divan which ran round the room, he took down several pairs of swords and threw them on the table. "Choose for yourself," he said.

George de Croisenois was as desirous as Norbert of putting an end to all the suspense—anything was preferable to this mental agony. That last look from the duchess had entered his heart like a dagger; and when he had seen Norbert thrust aside his kneeling wife, he had only with difficulty restrained himself from felling him to the ground. He did not condescend to look at the swords which were offered to him for inspection, but snatching up one of them, he exclaimed, "This will do, as well as another!"

They then went out into the garden, but the fog was so thick one could not even distinguish one's own hand at arm's length. "It is impossible," said Norbert, "to do anything in darkness like this. However, I've an idea. Follow me down this narrow passage, if you please, so that we may not awaken the suspicion of the concierge."

They reached a stable where Norbert found a large lantern and lighted it. "With this," said he in a tone of intense satisfaction, "we shall be able to see all night."

"Yes, but the neighbours can see as well. This light, at this hour, would certainly attract attention."

"Don't be concerned, no one can see into my grounds."

They then returned into the garden, which they crossed diagonally, finally reaching the spot which Norbert had spoken of. He hung his lantern on to a tree. It gave rather more light than an ordinary street gas burner.

"We will dig the grave over there in that corner," said the duke to Croisenois, "and then we can cover the ground with some of that straw near by." He took off his overcoat, as he spoke, and handing a spade to Croisenois, he took another, exclaiming grimly: "To work! to work!"

It would have taken Croisenois the whole night to complete this task; but the duke had not forgotten the days when he dug in the fields at Champdoce. He exerted all his strength and displayed marvellous skill, working on with a kind of mad rage, till the sweat gathered in large drops on his brow. Thus, thanks to his superhuman exertions, in forty minutes the grave was dug.

"Enough!" said Norbert; and throwing down his spade, he took up his sword, adding, "On guard, sir!"

But Croisenois did not move—impressionable and nervous by nature, he felt a cold chill at his heart. The night—the vacillating light—all these hideous preparations affected his imagination. He could not take his eyes from that yawning grave—it fascinated and attracted him.

"Well," said Norbert, impatiently.

Croisenois started. "I will speak," he said at last, in a solemn tone. "In a minute, sir, one of us will be lying there dead; a man does not lie in the face of death. Hear me. I swear to you on my honour, and on all my hopes of salvation, that the Duchess de Champdoce is innocent."

"You have said that before, why repeat it?"

"Because it is my duty, sir—because I think with horror that my mad passion has ruined the noblest and purest of women. Believe me, sir, I entreat of you, you have nothing to forgive her. See here, I am not ashamed to entreat you—yes, to entreat you humbly—to allow my death, if you kill me, to serve as full expiation. Be humane towards your wife—treat her kindly—do not make her life one long torture."

"Enough! or I shall look upon you as a coward."

"Alas!" cried Croisenois, "on guard, then, and may God decide between us!"

Their swords crossed, and the combat began—quick and violent. The space which the lantern lighted was but small, and whenever one of the adversaries was driven into the shadow as frequently happened, the other remained in the light, exposed to thrusts he could not parry, as he did not see them come. This proved fatal to Croisenois; for on one occasion, as he advanced, Norbert lunged forward and pierced him in the breast. The poor fellow throw up his arms, and dropped his sword—his knees bent under him, and he fell back without a cry or sound of any kind. Three times he tried to rise, but thrice his strength failed him. He wished to speak, but could only pronounce a few unintelligible words, for the blood already choked him. A convulsion—one long-drawn breath—and he was dead.

George de Croisenois was dead. Yes, he was dead, and Norbert de Champdoce stood beside him, with eyes dilated in terror, with his hair rising on end, quivering horribly from head to foot. He realized then, for the first time, what it is to see a man die by one's own hand.

And yet Norbert was not so much disturbed by the thought that he had killed Croisenois, for he believed his cause just, and considered he had acted rightly. But sweat gathered on his brow, and he felt mortal anguish at the thought that he must lift that body in his arms, and throw it, yet warm and palpitating, into yonder grave. He hesitated and struggled with himself for at least ten minutes—he recapitulated all the reasons which made it necessary he should do this at once. The risk of discovery—the honour of his house. At last he stooped, put out his arms, but recoiled before his hands touched the body. His heart failed him, and he straightened himself up again. It was only after another long struggle with himself that he once more stooped down. This time he seized hold of the body, and with extraordinary strength threw it into the grave where it fell with a dull thud, which sounded to Norbert like the noise of an earthquake. Then snatching up the spade which poor George had used so clumsily only a little while before, he swiftly filled up the grave and battered down the earth, finally covering it all over with straw and dried leaves. "And so," he said aloud, "this is the end of a man who wronged a Champdoce—this is what it cost him."

He stopped short, for a few paces off in the shade, under the trees, barely a foot or two from the ground, he fancied he could detect a human face with a pair of shining eyes fixed upon him. The shock was so great that he staggered; but in a moment he recovered himself, and snatching up his bloody sword, he rushed to the spot where he had perceived this frightful apparition. At his first gesture, however, a human form—a woman's form—had started up and fled like the wind towards the house. But Norbert caught her on the steps.

"Mercy!" she cried, falling on her knees, "mercy! Do not kill me."

Without replying, he dragged her by her clothes to the end of the garden, under the lantern. She was a girl of eighteen or nineteen—ugly, dirty, and poorly clad. Norbert examined her, and could not recognize her, though he fancied he had seen her before. "Who are you?" he asked at last.

Her answer was a torrent of tears, and he realized he should never be able to get her to speak if he did not begin by reassuring her. "Come, now," he

said, more gently, "don't weep in this foolish way, I'm not going to hurt you. Who are you?"

"I'm Caroline Schimmel."

"Caroline?" he repeated.

"Yes, Monsieur le Duc; I have been a scullion here for three months."

"How does it happen you are not at the wedding with the others?"

"Alas! it wasn't my fault; I was invited, and wanted to go, but I hadn't a decent dress to wear: I've only fifteen francs wages a month. I'm very unfortunate, for not one of the women in the house would lend me one."

"How did you happen to be in the garden?" interrupted Norbert.

"Oh! Monsieur le Duc, I felt so very unhappy, and I was sitting at my attic window crying, when all at once I saw a light in the garden. I thought it might be robbers, and I went down the servants' stairs on tip-toe."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw everything."

"What do you mean by everything?"

"Well, when I got here you and the other man were digging. I made certain you were searching for hidden treasure. But, bless me! how mistaken I was! The other began to talk to you, but I couldn't hear a word, you, either of you said; and then you began to fight. I was horribly frightened, but I couldn't turn my eyes away. Then I saw the man fall back—"

"And then?"

"Then," she repeated, with evident hesitation, "I saw you—bury him—then—"

"Did you have a good look at this man?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Duc."

"Had you ever seen him before? Do you know his name?"

"No, Monsieur le Duc."

Norbert reflected for a moment. "Listen, my girl," he said. "If you know how to hold your tongue—if you know how to forget—it will be a great piece of luck for you that you came into the garden to-night."

"I will never say a word, Monsieur le Duc, to any human being. I swear to you I never will."

"Very well. If you keep this oath your fortune's as good as made. To-morrow I'll give you a handsome sum, and you can return to your province, and marry any good fellow you may happen to fancy."

"Can that really be, Monsieur le Duc?"

"It will be. Now go up to your room again and go to bed. To-morrow my valet Jean will tell you just what you are to do, and you must obey him as you would obey me."

"Oh! Monsieur le Duc!—oh! Monsieur le Duc," and in her transports of joy, the ugly scullion wept and laughed together.

To know that his name, honour, and life were in the hands of a girl like this, meant the loss of all repose and sense of security for Norbert. And yet, he was at her mercy! For it resolved itself into that. He realised that in future this girl's merest wishes would be orders he must obey. No matter what absurd notions and fancies she might take into her head, he must comply with them all. What means could he employ to liberate himself from this odious slavery? He only knew of one—murder; but surely there had been enough blood spilt on that one night.

Four persons now possessed, or were on the point of possessing Norbert's secret. First, the unknown person who had written the anonymous letter, then the duchess, and Caroline, and finally, Jean, whom he would be compelled to confide in. But this was not the moment to reflect. Danger was perhaps at hand. The servants might at any moment return. Accordingly, Norbert obliterated the last traces of the duel, and then went to his wife's room.

He expected to find her unconscious, lying where she had fallen when he pushed her back. But the duchess was seated in an arm-chair beside the fire. She was very pale, and her eyes shone with fever. She rose when he entered the room, fixing such a strange look upon him that he involuntarily bowed his head.

But ashamed of his own moral cowardice, he swiftly raised it again. "My honour is avenged," he said, with a bitter sneer. "The Marquis de Croisenois is dead. I have killed your lover, madame."

She was apparently prepared for this blow, for she did not start; only her expression became more haughty, and the lurid light in her dark eyes grew more intense. "You are mistaken," she said, in a wonderfully calm voice. "You are mistaken, Monsieur de Croisenois—George—was not my lover."

"Oh! spare yourself the trouble of lying; I ask no questions."

Norbert was inexpressibly irritated by his wife's calm impassibility, and would have given anything to have been able to dispel this mood, which to him was utterly inexplicable. But in vain did he use the most mortifying words, and speak in the most sarcastic tone; she had reached heights he could not attain.

"I am not lying," she answered, coldly. "Why should I deceive or feign? What have I to fear or dread any more in this world? You wish the truth? Very well, you shall have it. Learn, first, that it was with my knowledge and my permission that George came here this evening. He came because I expected him. I left the small gate open for him."

"Madame!"

"When you came, he had not been five minutes in my room, where he had never been before. I might have left you, fled from you, perhaps; but living under your roof and bearing your name I could never have betrayed you. When you entered the room, he was begging me to fly with him. At that moment his life and his honour were mine. Ah! why did I hesitate? Had I said, yes, he would have been living, and in some country far away; we two might have learned that this life was not all sorrow."

She became more and more animated as she spoke; all her usual timidity seemed to have vanished. "Yes, I will tell you all," she continued—"all, since you desire it. Ah! I loved him before I even knew that there was such a person as yourself in existence. It was my broken love I wept for on the day when I was weak enough to obey my father, cowardly enough to give my hand to such a man as you! And it is my own folly I now deplore—my own miserable weakness. Why did I ever consent to be your wife? You have killed George, you say? No; not so. His memory will live for ever in my heart, radiant and imperishable."

"Take care!" cried Norbert; "take care! If—"

"Ah! you will kill me, too? Do so! I will make no struggle for life; it is worth nothing without him. He is no more. I have lived, and life can have no charms for me henceforth, death would be welcome. To kill me would be the only boon you could now bestow on me! Strike! You

would unite us in death, and my lips would murmur, till they grew cold and rigid: 'Thanks! thanks!'"

Norbert listened, confounded, astonished that he had still any power of feeling left him, after the terrible scenes he had passed through. Was this she—Marie, his wife—who expressed herself with this unheard-of violence—who braved him thus, and defied his anger? How could he have so misunderstood her? He had often compared her to polar ice, and now she burst forth into volcanic passion. He forgot all his resentment in his admiration. She seemed to him absolutely transfigured, her beauty was something unearthly, her eyes glistened like stars, and her superb hair fell around her shoulders in heavy masses. Yes, this was passion—real passion—not the mocking shadow he had so long pursued. Marie was capable of loving, really loving; whilst for Diane, the fair-haired beauty with the steel-blue eyes, love was only a battle or a jest! This was a revelation, indeed. Ah! what would he not have given to have been able to efface the past? An absurd, preposterous idea entered his mind. He really fancied that his wife might possibly forgive him, and so went towards her with extended arms. "Marie!" he said, "Marie!"

"I forbid you," she answered—"I forbid you to call me Marie."

He did not reply, but approached still nearer—when, all at once, she threw herself back with a fearful shriek. "Blood!" she cried—"blood on your hands!"

Norbert looked at his hands. It was true. The palm of his left hand was crimson red, and on his right shirt-cuff there was a large spot of blood. The sight well nigh overwhelmed him, and yet he once more made a pleading gesture.

But the duchess pointed to the door. "Go!" she cried, with extraordinary vehemence—"go! I will not betray you—I will keep the secret of your crime. But never forget that there lies a corpse between us, and that I hate you!"

Rage and jealousy tore Norbert's heart. Croisenois, although dead, would harm him still. "And you," he answered, in a hoarse voice—"you seem to forget that I am your husband—that you are mine—that I can make your life one long agony. Let me remind you of that. To-morrow, at ten o'clock, I shall be here."

He left the house just as the clocks were striking two, and hurried to the Esplanade des Invalides. Steady at his post, the soldier was still leading the horse about. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, however, when Norbert appeared, "you make long visits! I only had leave to go to the theatre, and I shall get into trouble."

"Ishaw! I told you I would give you twenty francs. Take a couple," and Norbert handed him two louis.

"Ah!" exclaimed the soldier, in delighted astonishment, and saluting the duke as deferentially as if he had been a marshal of France, he hurried off.

An hour later, Norbert rapped at the window of the wine shop, where Jean was waiting. "Take care not to be seen when you take the horse in," he said, "and then come to me; I need your advice and experience."

XVIII.

GRIEF, anger, and horror had imparted wonderful strength and energy to the Duchess de Champdoce, whilst she was in her husband's presence; but as soon as she found herself alone, all her excitement subsided, and exhausted by the stupendous effort she had made, she sank on to a sofa, half fainting and sobbing. Her despair was all the greater, as she reproached herself for Croisenois' death. "If I had not granted him that fatal rendez-vous," she said to herself, "he would be living now; it is my love that killed him!"

Her distress was truly terrible. At one moment the idea of going to her father occurred to her; but she rejected it, for what good would it do? The Count de Puymandour would hardly listen to her, or at the most merely say: "You are a duchess, you have five hundred thousand francs a year; you must be happy, or at least you ought to be!"

The night was passed in untold anguish, and when her maids entered her room, about ten o'clock the next morning, they found her stretched on the floor, dressed as they had last seen her at dinner. Her limbs were stiff and cold, her head was burning, and her eyes glistening. This discovery caused quite a panic in the house. No one knew what to do, and four messengers had been despatched, one after the other, for a doctor, when Norbert arrived from Maisons. He went at once to his wife's room. She did not recognise him. Finding her in this condition, he became very uneasy as to what had taken place in his absence. Accordingly he began to question the maids as skillfully as he could, and while thus occupied not one physician, but two arrived. They declared that the duchess was in an alarming state, expressed doubt whether she would even live through this strange attack, and advised a consultation for the afternoon. Then, after urging the strictest adherence to their prescriptions, and the most careful watchfulness, they retired.

These injunctions were superfluous. Norbert took his place at his wife's bedside, determined not to leave her until she was either better or dead. She was now in a terrible fever, and the language delirium brought to her lips made Norbert shudder. This was the second time he had been compelled to guard a secret in the same way. Formerly, at Champdoce, it was his father he watched—the father who could disclose the terrible crime he had attempted. And now he had to guard his wife, and prevent the story of Croisenois' fate escaping her lips. Forced to sit at Marie's side—forced to the contemplation of the past—he was horror-stricken to think that, at twenty-five, he had to look back upon such appalling crimes, and forward to a life filled with such remorse and gloom. What a future was in store for him after such a past! And his wife's delirium was not his only care. Every ten minutes he rang to ascertain if Jean, his faithful valet, had not yet arrived.

At last, after repeated inquiries, Jean came, and Norbert at once led him to the embrasure of a window. "Well?" he asked.

"It is all arranged, sir—be easy."

"This Caroline—"

"Is gone, sir. I put her into the train myself, after giving her twenty thousand francs. She has left Paris, and proposes going to America to

find a cousin, who will marry her in all probability—at all events she hopes so.”

Norbert breathed more freely—the thought of this Caroline Schimmel had been a fearful weight. “And the other matter?” he asked.

The old servant shook his head sadly. “Ah! It’s very perilous,” he said.

“What have you done?”

“I have discovered a young commercial traveller, an honest fellow I’m told, who thinks I wish to send him to Egypt to buy cotton. He’ll start to-day, and post the two letters written by M. de Croisenois—one at Marseilles, and the second at Cairo.”

“And you don’t see that these letters will make me perfectly secure?”

“I see that the least carelessness on the part of our agent, or the merest accident, may betray us.”

“And yet it must be done.”

Jean made no rejoinder. He did not know how to resist his master’s orders, so the traveller started, and the letters were posted in due course.

During the two next days Norbert had not a minute to himself. After their consultation the physicians had given a ray of hope, but it was a very faint one. It was suggested that the duchess’s reason might always be impaired. And during these hours, which seemed an eternity, Norbert dared not even close his eyes, and it was with a sick dread that he allowed the maids even to enter their mistress’s room—for her delirium persisted, and Croisenois’ name was constantly mentioned in her ravings. However, on the fourth day the fever turned, Marie slept, and Norbert had leisure to reflect.

How was it that Madame de Mussidan, who usually came every day, had given no signs of life? This circumstance seemed to him so extraordinary that he ventured to write her a brief note informing her of his wife’s illness. An hour later he received this laconic reply: “Do you believe there is any reason for Monsieur de Mussidan’s sudden announcement that we are to spend the winter in Italy? We leave to-night. Farewell! “D.”

So she abandoned him then—abandoned him; and thus his last hope vanished. And yet he was still so blind that he fancied this separation was really as great a blow to her as to himself.

A few days later, when Madame de Champdoce was out of danger, although he himself was still bowed down by this last misfortune, the doctor took him aside in a mysterious manner; he had to announce a startling though delightful piece of news: the Duchess de Champdoce was *cuciné*.

Such indeed was the case, and this was the secret that Marie had been on the point of revealing to George de Croisenois when her husband’s arrival interrupted their interview. It was the thought of her condition that had prevented her from leaving her husband’s roof, and had given her courage to resist her lover’s entreaties to elope with him. Unfortunately, she had not disclosed the fact to Norbert, and now that the news came to him, after that terrible scene, after the duel and the death of Croisenois, it was bound to rekindle all his rage. Persuaded of his wife’s guilt, despite all her protestations, he could only imagine that the child she had conceived was none of his. As the physician spoke to him he turned pale, and his eyes flashed fire. “Thanks, doctor,” he stammered—“thanks for this good

news. "It makes me very happy, of course. Excuse me—I must go to the duchess at once."

However, instead of going to his wife, he repaired to his library and locked himself in. He needed solitude to look this new situation full in the face, and regain his self-possession. The more Norbert reflected, the more he persuaded himself that he had been miserably duped. Must he welcome the child of George de Croisenois and rear it as his own? Must he accept this living testimony of his degradation? This child would grow up in his house, bear his name, and inherit the enormous fortune of the Champdore family. "No! never," he cried, "never? I would strangle it sooner with my own hands!"

The more he thought of the disgust he would be compelled to hide—of the caresses and affection he must feign, to avoid the suspicions of the world—the more impossible it seemed to him that he could play such a monstrous farce. And yet although he longed for vengeance, he determined to dissimulate. The fact is, he feared his wife's revelations. The mysterious disappearance of De Croisenois had created a great sensation, and although the letters posted by Jean's emissary thickened the mystery of the affair, they did not satisfy either the police or the public. However, the world grows tired of everything in turn, other strange events occurred, Croisenois was forgotten, and Norbert at last began to believe that he could hope with impunity. He led a miserable life. He felt utterly worn out and exhausted. He was not yet twenty-five, and yet there did not seem to be a ray of hope in the future. For three months Diane had given him no sign of life, a river of blood separated him from his wife; among all his associates he had not a single true friend, and dissipation utterly palled on his taste.

Thus in the seclusion of his own house he pondered on what had now become his one fixed idea: how could he get rid of that child which was coming into the world, how could he free himself from bringing it up as his own? It seemed to him that there was only one plan possible. He must procure another child no matter where or how, and substitute it for the infant the duchess was about to give birth to. Yes, that was the only feasible scheme he could think of, and accordingly he explained it to Jean, whom devotion had made his accomplice. For the first time, since Norbert had been his master, Jean resisted. This substitution seemed to him abominable, and he did not hesitate to express his conviction that it would certainly entail misfortune for all who took part in it. Still, Norbert was so pressing and imperative, that, at last, the old valet reluctantly consented to assist him, being all the more influenced as his master had talked of applying to some one else, who might prove less scrupulous and skilful in carrying out this infernal scheme.

The enterprise was a perilous one, difficult to conduct with due secrecy; special coincidences were needed to insure success, and even when every possible precaution was taken, something must still be left to chance. No matter. A month later Jean informed his master that it would be advisable for the duchess to establish herself at once at the Château de L—, a place owned by the Champdore family near Montoire. Once there the old valet would answer for the rest. Accordingly, the very next day Norbert took his wife to L—. "Poor woman! she was the mere shadow of herself. Of recent times she and Norbert had lived like strangers under the same roof—weeks sometimes elapsing without their seeing each other, for when they had anything to communicate they usually wrote it down."

The Château de L—— was marvellously adapted to Norbert's plan—for once there the duchess was entirely at her husband's mercy and discretion. She could look nowhere for assistance; she had not even the faint hope of her father's help, for a month previously he had died suddenly, from appointment and vexation, at having been beaten at an election. It was exactly occurred at L—— when the duchess was confined? It is difficult to say, so well was the secret kept. The note in which the poor mother wrote: "Have mercy, give me back our child," alone reveals something of the terrible struggle which undoubtedly took place. However, this much is certain—the child which the duchess gave birth to was left by Jean at the Foundling Hospital of Vendôme; and it is moreover beyond question that the infant, baptised under the name of Anne-René-Gontran de Donnair, Marquis de Champdoce, was really the son of a poor girl of the environs of Montoire, who was called the "Witch."

XIX.

At this point B. Mascarot's manuscript abruptly ended. Paul Violaine laid the leaves on the table, saying with some surprise, "And that's all?" It was, however, quite time he finished, for his voice was well-nigh broken by this perusal of six hours' duration, with but one or two pauses of a few minutes. The narrative had certainly been listened to with due attention. Neither Catenac nor Hortebize had interrupted, either with remark or gesture. As for B. Mascarot, he had apparently listened with the satisfaction of an author who is proud of his work, but in reality, as he sat leaning back in his arm-chair, twirling his thumbs, he was keenly watching his companions. The effect of the narrative had been just what he had anticipated. The perusal was over, and Paul, Catenac and Hortebize, still looked at each other, with an air of mingled terror and stupefaction. The lawyer was the first to break the silence. "Ah! ha! I always said that our friend Baptistin was born for literature. As soon as he takes up a pen the business man disappears, and instead of notes and memoranda, we have a romance!"

"Do you really look on this as a romance!" asked Hortebize.

"A romance in form, certainly—you will admit that."

"Catenac," said Mascarot, in a sarcastic tone, "ought, better than any one else, to be able to judge of the veracity of this tale, he being the adviser of the noble Duke de Champdoce, this very Norbert whose youth I have described."

"I don't deny the foundation," said Catenac, quickly.

"Then what do you deny?"

"Nothing, in fact; I was merely jesting. I merely object to the somewhat romantic form in which you have stated your case."

"Catenac," resumed Mascarot, "has heard several important statements from his noble client, but he has taken good care never to communicate them to us. Knowing as much as he did, he had every reason to believe we were going straight on to the rocks, and should be wrecked. Indeed, he positively hoped such would prove the case, and that he would thus get rid of us for good!" The advocate tried to protest and deny, but Mascarot silenced him with a threatening look and an imperious wave of the hand. "As for this narrative being a romance," he resumed, "my

work has merely been so much editing—so much classification and curtailment. The romantic element, if such it be, is entirely the work of Norbert and Madame de Mussidan. Certain things may have seemed to you far fetched, but don't blame me. I have merely been a copyist."

"It seems to me—"

"It seems to me," interrupted Mascarat, "that you have forgotten Madame de Mussidan's correspondence. She is a very careful woman, and had preserved not only her own letters, which Norbert returned to her, but also his answers."

"And we have them?"

"Most certainly we have, and my narrative is mainly a *resumé* of their contents, supplemented by information from the instigator of the original intrigue—'judge' Dauman."

"The 'judge' indeed! What, is he still living?"

"Certainly he is, and you know him too. He's one of our people. He is no longer in his *première jeunesse*, no doubt; in fact, he's rather broken as regards his limbs, but his brain is still intact."

Catenac had become very serious. "You tell me so much—" he began.

"I can tell you even more," interrupted Mascarat. "I can tell you that all the particulars of the duel and death of poor George de Croisenois were written under the dictation of Caroline Schimmel. When this woman left Paris with the 20,000 francs Jean had given her, she meant to go to America, but as it happened she travelled no farther than Le Havre. The good looks and persuasive language of a gallant sailor she met there, changed her plans. This sailor was certainly a most amiable man as long as her money lasted, but somehow or other he disappeared just at the same time as her last thousand franc note. Caroline was as poor as ever again, but, however, she contrived to return to Paris, and applied to the Duke de Champdoce. He realised he was caught, and succoured her. Four or five times he tried to assure Caroline a comfortable little position, but her misconduct made all attempts in that direction useless. At last the duke resignedly allowed her to black-mail him whenever she chose, accepting this shame, perhaps, as a kind of penance. She leads a queer life. Now and then she'll seek a situation and work for a week or two, but her dissolute habits soon gain the upper hand, and then she goes off to the Duke de Champdoce and asks him for money. However, the oath of secrecy she swore was until very recently faithfully kept by her. If it hadn't been for her partiality to the bottle, Tantaine would probably have failed to extort a word from her. It may happen, that having recovered, she will remember she has divulged the duke's secret, and go and warn him of the fact."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Catenac, in alarm, "in that case—"

"Do you think," asked Mascarat, "that I should be as much at ease as I am, if I feared any peril? What would Caroline say. Who would she accuse of having stolen her secret? An old man named Tantaine. Do you suppose the noble duke, your client, would be able to trace any connection between a poor devil like Tantaine, and a highly respected advocate like yourself?"

"It would be difficult, indeed!"

"And besides," urged Dr. Hortebize, "at the first sign of danger we should suppress old Tantaine. No trace of him would ever more be found."

Dr. Mascarat nodded approvingly, and then resumed, "What have we really to fear from the Duke de Champdoce? Nothing at all in my opinion."

We hold him as surely as we hold the Countess de Mussidan. We have his letters, and we know that Croisenois' skeleton could be found in his garden. The identity of the marquis's remains could easily be established, for we know that when he disappeared he had about his person a thousand francs or so in Spanish *onzas*. That fact is distinctly stated in the report of the inquiry which took place concerning his disappearance."

It was amusing to watch Catenac's face, and see how his feelings and views changed as he gradually became convinced that little or no risk was incurred by these proceedings. "Come," said he, "enough speaking. I'm at your discretion. Am I not? And, besides, you've convinced me. I'll act loyally, I give you my word. Explain your plan, and then I'll tell you all I have learned from the duke."

Mascarot smiled with an air of satisfaction. He had really won the day, and no longer doubted the advocate's sincerity. "Before anything else," said he, "I must give you the end of the story which Paul has just read. The Duke and Duchess de Champdoce renounced all hopes of happiness, but they both determined to save appearances, and did not allow the world to suspect the terrible life they led. The duchess, who had become a great invalid, devoted all the time her ailments allowed her to works of charity; and the duke, after applying himself to remedy the deficiencies of his early education, became one of the most remarkable men in Europe."

"And Madame de Mussidan?" asked Catenac.

"Her husband's father was dead. She had now become a countess with great wealth at her disposal. However, with the strange perversity of her character, she did not consider herself completely avenged on Norbert, until he learned that he owed the crowning misfortune of his life to her; and, in fact, on her return from Italy she sent for Norbert and told him everything. Yes, she dared to tell him that it was she who had, so to say, impelled his wife into Croisenois' arms—she told him that it was she who, having heard of the rendezvous, had written him that fatal anonymous letter."

"And he didn't kill her?" cried Horfelize.

"Hadn't she all his letters? And she threatened him with them, moreover. Oh! we need not flatter ourselves that we have the monopoly of blackmailing! This noble countess made the duke sholl out just as if she had been a mere adventuress. Only ten days ago she borrowed—she called it borrowing, you observe—a large sum from him, to appease Van Klopen. However, on that point *sufficit*, let us turn to the child who was substituted for the duchess's real son. You knew him, doctor, I believe."

"I often saw him. He was a handsome fellow—"

"Yes, but a miserable scamp after all. He was educated and brought up in the most princely manner; but he had the tastes and manners of a lacquey, and if he had lived he would certainly have dishonoured the name he bore. He had caused the duke and duchess any amount of despair, when some ten months ago he was carried off by a brain fever. He died, imploring the forgiveness of those whom he believed to be his parents, and they forgot their animosity towards each other at the bedside of this dying youth who had caused them so much sorrow—a sorrow, which Norbert, at least, may have looked upon as divine punishment. Well, this lad being dead, it seemed as if the name of Champdoce was doomed to extinction. However, urged by his wife, Norbert decided to try and find the child, left at the Foundling Hospital of Vendôme. He could not undo what had been done, but still, in accordance with the law, he might adopt this child and

bequeath fortune, name, and title to him. He no longer doubted that the boy was really his own; and so, all hope and expectation, he started for Vendôme provided with all needful information for identification. A terrible disappointment awaited him. It was admitted at the hospital that a child had been received there on the day Norbert named, and clothed as he described. The register proved all this, and the medal the poor little foundling had worn round his neck was even produced. But on the other hand, the child had long since left the hospital, and no one knew what had become of him. When twelve years old, he had run away, and all efforts to find him again had proved unavailing."

It was with a keen pang that Catenac listened to these precise particulars, which showed how well informed his associates were. He had hoped to be able to reveal many of these points himself as an atonement for his past treachery.

However, Mascarot continued, "This new misfortune overwhelmed the Duke de Champdoce. After the crimes and follies of his youth, which he considered he had bitterly expiated by long years of misery and anguish, he had hoped at least to end his days in peace, and to find his home not quite desolate after all; but even this solace now seemed denied him. He returned home, looking fully twenty years older, and had to tell his poor wife the sad truth. Their son had disappeared—there was no hope of finding him. For some days the duke remained in a state of absolute prostration, but at last it seemed to him that it would be culpable cowardice not to make an effort to try and find the child. The world is wide, no doubt, and a nameless, penniless boy flying from a foundling hospital is a mere speck on its surface; but then with money miracles can be accomplished, so why shouldn't the duke make an effort? With his great wealth he might obtain the assistance of the most expert detectives. And besides, his life would have an object, and in the search he might utilise all his own energies now running to waste. Seized with this idea, he swore that he would never rest—that he would never despair of finding his son until he held in his hands the indisputable proofs of the lad's death. However, he did not confide his project to the duchess. He feared, for he had learned to have some consideration for her, that alternatives of despair and hope would be more than she could bear. Her health was so shattered, that such excitement might kill her. Having fully reflected, he began by applying to that lesser Providence which watches over society from the Rue de Jerusalem. However the police hardly paid any attention to him. They merely said, 'All right. We'll see what can be done; call again in a month's time. Good-morning.' The fact is, the duke's peculiar position imposed especial reserve upon him. As he could not tell the truth, he naturally presented the subject weakly, and in fact, awakened no interest. This was very unfortunate for him, for he had been received by a rather clever chap—a fellow who has a big reputation at the Préfecture, who is our friend Martin Rigal's neighbour by the way, and whose name is Lecoq."

To Paul's great surprise, this name produced an appalling effect on Dr. Hortobize, who at once started to his feet, caught hold of the locket dangling from his watch-chain, and looked round the room with haggard eyes. "Stop!" said he, in a choked voice, "if that Lecoq's mixed up in this, I withdraw, for nothing will go well. Yes, really, I withdraw."

His panic was so singular, that Catenac dignified to smile. "Ah! ah!" said the lawyer, "I understand your excitement. But don't be troubled; Lecoq has nothing to do with us."

This assurance was not enough for Hortebize, who turned and looked at Mascarot. "No, Lecoq has nothing to do with us," repeated the agent. "The specter replied that his position prevented him from occupying himself with any private investigation—which is true, by the way. The duke offered him a large sum if he would give up his position, but he refused, saying that he did not work for money, but for art."

"Which is also true," interposed Catenac.

"To make a long story short, it was when Lecoq refused his assistance that the duke applied to Catenac, who introduced him to Perpignan. I believe that is everything—"

"Yes, that's everything," said the advocate, "I will merely add that the duke requested me to superintend the searches."

"Have you a plan?"

"Not yet. The duke's instructions are these: 'Succeed, even if you have to question everybody on earth.' However, operations have not yet commenced, and to say the truth, I am very much of Perpignan's opinion, the enterprise is a senseless one."

"Lecoq thought that success was possible."

"He said so, no doubt; but I fancy that if he had really *thought* so, he would have undertaken the task himself."

"Well," said Mascarot, calmly, "I have felt certain of success ever since the outset."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and I have been at work—"

"What! You have been to Vendôme!"

"Never mind: I have been somewhere, at all events, and at this very moment I can lay my hand on the Duke de Champdore's heir."

"You are jesting!"

"I was never more serious in my life—I have found him. Only, as it is quite impossible for me to appear in the matter, I reserve the pleasure of restoring this child to his father to yourself and Perpignan."

Catenac looked at Mascarot, Hortebize, and Paul in turn, as if desirous of assuring himself that he was not being laughed at. "You don't wish to appear?" he said at last to his associate, in a suspicious tone. "And why? Do you fear failure then? Do you want to ensnare me?"

Mascarot shrugged his shoulders. "First of all," he said, "I am no traitor, as you very well know. Then it is our mutual interest that no misfortune should befall you. One of us can't be compromised without harming the others. And besides, as to laying a trap for you, the part you'll have to play is so simple that treachery or bad faith is quite out of the question. You will have nothing to do but to point out the beginning of the scent. Others will follow it up at their own risk and peril, and you will only have to look on."

"But—"

Mascarot's patience was gone; and he frowned severely. "Enough!" he harshly answered. "No further discussion is required; I am the master, and you must obey."

When the agent spoke in this style, it was pure waste of time to try and resist, and so Catenac, albeit humiliated and puzzled, discreetly relapsed into silence. "Now," resumed Mascarot, "sit down at my table and take careful notes of what I am about to say. Success, as I have told you, is certain, but I must be ably seconded. Everything now depends on your exactitude and the precision of your movements—one false step may spoil our game."

XX.

WITHOUT another word, hiding his resentment and jealousy under an equivocal smile, Catenac sat down at the agent's table, opened a large notebook, and provided himself with a well sharpened pencil. In the meanwhile, Mascaret, on his side, took up a dozen of those cardboard squares which he spent his life in studying.

"Now, Paul," said he, "pray listen, and you, Catenac, don't lose a word of what I am going to say. To-day's Thursday; can it be arranged that the Duke de Champdoce, Perpignan, and yourself, shall start for Vendôme on Saturday?"

"Possibly so," answered the advocate.

"Answer me with a yes or no. Are you sure that you can take these people there?"

"Well, then—yes."

"Very well; on Saturday you will start, and on reaching Vendôme you must go to the Hôtel de la Poste."

"Hôtel de la Poste!" grumbled Catenac, with the air of a secretary who repeats the last words of a phrase dictated to him.

"On the day of your arrival at Vendôme," resumed Mascaret, "you will naturally do nothing—you will rest and feel your way. It will be Sunday, as you know. Nevertheless, go to the hospital together, and repeat the inquiries which the duke previously made alone. The superior, who is a woman of the higher class, and a good woman too, will take the greatest pleasure in answering your questions. Through her you will again obtain the description of the boy, and the precise date of his disappearance. She will tell you that it was on the 9th of September 1856, that his flight was discovered. She will tell you that he was at that time a tall, vigorous lad, with an intelligent countenance, and keen bright eyes, healthy and handsome, about twelve years and a half old, but looking fully fifteen. She will say that he wore a gray linen blouse, trousers of cotton stuff striped blue and white, a little cap without a peak, and a black silk neckcloth with white spots. She will add that the young fellow also carried away with him a white blouse, a pair of gray trousers, and a pair of new shoes, tied up in a coloured handkerchief."

The lawyer watched the agent with stealthy curiosity. "Upon my word!" he muttered, "you are well informed."

"Passably so, I think," answered Mascaret carelessly; and then in a quick decided tone, he continued: "After this you will return to your hotel, and not until then—you understand—you will hold a consultation as to your first steps. Perpignan's plan is a good one—"

"You know it then?"

"I think so. He will suggest dividing the environs of Vendôme into a certain number of zones, and visiting every dwelling in these zones in succession."

"The project seems reasonable to me."

"It is so. Let him initiate it, but quietly influence its execution. Draw his attention to the fact that a natural division of the surrounding localities in some measure already exists, and that the simplest course is to begin by exploring, first of all, the *communes* depending from Vendôme itself, and

then all the *cantons* of the *arrondissement*. In support of your idea ask for Bescherelle's Geographical Dictionary, and determine the others to work in the order the dictionary indicates. That is to say, you will, first of all, visit the *commune* of Arcinès, then Azé, then Marcilly, but that's already more than enough."

"Arcinès," repeated Catenac, like an echo; "Azé, Marcilly."

Mascarot leaned over the advocate and touched his shoulder lightly. "Note the order," he said; "the order I indicate. Everything depends on that."

"Never fear—it's written! Look."

The agent nodded his approbation. "When you set out," he continued, "you will naturally require a guide."

"Of course, we shall require such a person."

"Well, here, Catenac, I am obliged to leave something to chance; I can't do otherwise. But there are ninety-nine chances to one that the hotel-keeper will designate a man named Frégot, whom he employs as a commissioner. Still, it may be that his choice will fall on another. In that case you must, in some way or other—skilfully, mind—obtain the services of this particular man."

"But what am I to say to him?"

"Nothing at all. He knows what he has to do. His duties have been even more carefully traced out than your own; he understands everything fully. However, these preliminaries settled, you will, on Monday morning, begin your investigations in the Commune of Arcinès, under the guidance of Frégot. Leave all the responsibility to Perpignan; but be sure the duke is with you. You will begin by questioning the local authorities, who will not be able to give you any information, and then you must go through the village from door to door. Ask the inhabitants a series of questions which you will previously prepare. Something in this style: 'My friends, we are looking for a child. There are ten thousand francs reward for the person who puts us on the right track. At the beginning of September, 1856, this lad must have been in your neighbourhood after running away from the Foundling Hospital at Vendôme. Do any of you recollect such a child? Did any of you shelter or assist him? The ten thousand francs will be paid at once. He was thirteen years old, &c., &c.'"

The lawyer stopped Mascarot. "Wait a moment," he said; "I can find nothing better than your own words; so I'll just jot them down." And he proceeded to do so.

"On Monday," resumed the agent, "you will receive discouraging answers. Matters will be the same on Tuesday and on the next three days; but on Saturday be prepared for a great surprise. On that day Frégot will take you to a secluded farm, which is tilled by a man named Lorgelin, his wife and two sons. These good people will be at table; they will ask you to take some refreshment, and you will accept. But at the first words you utter about the child, you will see their faces change. The farmer's wife will turn pale and at once exclaim, 'Holy Virgin! these gentlemen are surely speaking of our poor Sans-Père.'"

Since he began to disclose his plan, Mascarot appeared to have grown taller, and his features, usually so composed, seemed animated by the spirit of perversity. His mode of explanation was wonderfully clear, and his gestures were full of authority. He spoke of problematic events as certain to happen, and described them with such strange lucidity, and with such merciless and logical reasoning, that they seemed to be absolutely real.

"What! The farmer's wife will say that?" exclaimed Catenac in surprise.

"Just that, and nothing else. Then the husband will explain that he gave the name of Saus-Père to a poor little fellow whom they found shivering in a ditch by the roadside early in September, 1856. The little fellow was taken home and charitably sheltered by them. You will begin to read your description of the youngster, but the farmer will close your mouth by giving his, which you will find to correspond precisely with your own. Then Lorgelin will sing the praises of this child; how the farm seemed like another place while he was there, so that they never had the courage to take him back to the hospital at Vendôme, as no doubt they ought to have done. The whole family will sing the youngster's praises. Saus-Père was so merry and clever. At thirteen he could write like a notary; and they will even show you some of his writing in an old account book. Finally, mother Lorgelin, with tears in her eyes, will tell you this petted child became an ingrate; for, a year later, in September, 1857, he left the family that had adopted him. Yes, he abandoned them to follow some mountebanks who had been performing in the neighbouring village. You will be touched by the regret these worthy folks will express. Lorgelin will tell you he went to Château Renault and to Blois, in hopes of finding the lad and bringing him back; but all in vain. He couldn't find him."

Catenac had held his breath for the denouement, and was much disappointed. "I confess I am puzzled to see what we shall have gained when we have heard the Lorgelin's story," said he.

"Let me finish," rejoined Mascarot. "In such a case you wouldn't know what to do; but Perpignan won't hesitate for a moment, I'll be bound. He will tell you that he has the end of the thread and can follow up the clew."

"I think you esteem Perpignan too highly."

"Not so. Each man has his trade. Besides, if he wanders off the scent, you must bring him back to it—delicately, cautiously, you understand. His first step will be to take you to the mayor's office in the village of Azé, near this farm. There you will ask to see the register of provisional licenses and permits, and on consulting it you will find that in September, 1857, there arrived at Azé, from Versailles, and bound for Tours, a party of mountebanks, comprising nine persons, with two vehicles and five horses, under the direction of a man called Vigoureux, nicknamed the 'Grasshopper.'"

Catenac had begun writing again, and his pencil flew over the paper. "Softly! softly!" he said; "I can't follow you."

After a pause of a few minutes, the agent continued: "An attentive examination of the register will show you that no other troupe of mountebanks passed through Azé that month. Therefore little Saus-Père must have followed the Grasshopper; and you will then read the description of this same Grasshopper's person, still in the same register: 'VIGOUREUX.—Born at La Bourgonce (Vosges); age, forty-seven; height, six feet two; eyes, small, grey, and near-sighted; complexion, dark. Third finger of the left hand cut off above the first joint.' If with these particulars you mistake any other mountebank for him, you must certainly be very stupid, all of you."

"I should never find him, though," muttered Catenac.

"But you have Perpignan, whose business it is to do so. You will see him bristling with importance, and overjoyed at what he has learned at the

mayor's office. He will tell you, loftily, that the investigations in the provinces are completed, and that it is advisable to return to Paris at once. Make no objections. Allow your noble client to reward Frégot and Lorgelin, but take care not to leave him behind you. I presume he will be in a hurry to reach Paris. When you arrive here again, Perpignan will take you at once to the Rue de Jerusalem, where Vigoureux must certainly have his papers like all other travelling artists. The police are very avaricious, and keep a firm hold on all the documents they possess; but the magic name of the Duke de Champdoce will open all the boxes. Finally, you will be informed that Vigoureux was sentenced to imprisonment for disorderly conduct in 1864, and that now he is still under surveillance, and keeps a wine-shop at the corner of the Rue Duplex—"

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Catenac; "let me take down his address."

"When you go to the Rue Duplex, you will recognise Vigoureux by his missing finger. He will admit that the little rascal followed him, and was with his troupe for ten months. He will say he was a fairly decent lad, but as proud as a peacock and as lazy as a lizard. All he cared for was music, and he became most intimate with an old Alsatian named Fritz, who was the band-master of the troupe. In fact, this old fellow and the lad were so happy in each other's society, that one fine day they went off together. Thereupon you will ask what has become of this Fritz, and Vigoureux will overwhelm you with insults; but in your capacity as a lawyer threaten him with punishment for carrying off a minor, and then he'll become as mild as a dove, and promise to try and find the old Alsatian. Before a week's over, he'll tell you he has found Fritz, whom you can see at the Hospice St. Magloire, where he has obtained comfortable shelter for his old age."

Catenac, Hortebize, and even Paul Violaine had long since lost their illusions, and the two former, at least, were not easily surprised, and yet they marvelled greatly as they listened to Mascaret still unwinding the thread of this strange search, proceeding from investigation to investigation in the most minute manner, and giving the most precise particulars concerning each successive prediction. "Now," resumed the agent, "this fellow Fritz is a cunning old scamp—tottering and bleary-eyed, no doubt—but a great deal more cute than he looks. Tell the Duke de Champdoce not to trust him too much. However, the old rogue will tell you, with many tears, all the sacrifices he made for his dear boy. He will tell you that he went without his tobacco and without his schnapps to pay for the music lessons which he insisted on Sans-Père taking. He will say he had determined that the lad should go to the *Conservatoire*; for he had recognised his surprising ability, and cherished the hope of seeing him become a great musician some day, like Weber or Mozart. I'm persuaded that Fritz's crocodile tears will touch your noble client. He will see his son rising above the trammels of poverty all unaided. He will recognise this energy as indicating the characteristics of the Champdoce family, and would be ready to accept the lad as his son on the strength of that alone."

It was always a hard task, not to say an impossible one, to divine Mascaret's thoughts, and Catenac had, for three quarters of an hour, been trying to guess what was passing in this spectacled sphinx's mind. What was he aiming at? Was all this serious, or merely so much joking? What was true and what was false in all he said and prophesied? The advocate was utterly at a loss to tell. Still, he was growing impatient, and so exclaimed, "Never mind, never mind about all that. I shall find out if your surmises are correct, later on, from the facts themselves."

"If your penetration requires no further explanations from me," rejoined Mascarot testily, "you will allow me, I trust, to continue for the benefit of our young friend, Paul Violaine, who has a far more difficult part to play than you. So, to resume, the old Alsatian will try and excite your compassion by declaring that as soon as the lad felt himself strong enough to fly alone, he abandoned Fritz, installed himself in a magnificent hotel in the Rue d'Arras, gave music lessons, and played of an evening in a band at a ball. However, you will listen impatiently to old Fritz's grumbling, for you will detect in his complaints the rancour of a disappointed speculator. He will confess to you, moreover, that his very bread comes from that 'ungrateful fellow.' The duke will, of course, leave him some testimonial of his joy, and then you will betake yourselves as fast as possible to the hotel in the Rue d'Arras. The landlord there will state that four years ago he got rid of this artist, the only one who ever dared to install himself in the house; but with a little skill, and a twenty-franc piece, you will obtain the name and address of one of the young musician's former pupils—Madame Grandorge—a widow in the Rue Saint Louis. This woman, who is still handsome, will tell you, with a blush, that she is ignorant of her former teacher's present address, but that he formerly resided at No. 57 Rue de la Harpe. From the Rue de la Harpe you will be sent to the Rue Jacob, and thence to the Rue Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue Joquelet."

The worthy agent here paused to draw breath, and indulge in one of those quiet chuckles which presage the success of some capital joke. "Be comforted, friend Catenac," he said; "you have nearly reached the end of your pilgrimage. The concierge in the Rue Montmartre, mother Bregot, who is the most obliging and most talkative woman in the world, will take much pleasure in explaining to you that the artist still has his bachelor apartment under her roof, but that he lives there no longer. 'For he has married,' she will add, 'and I'm glad of it. Last month he married the daughter of a rich banker in our street. This young lady, Mademoiselle Martin Rigal, fell head over heels in love with him!'"

Catenac ought to have foreseen what was coming, and yet he uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Upon my word!"

"Yes, that's precisely what she'll say," rejoined Mascarot, with modest triumph. "The Duke de Champdoce will drag you off to the residence of our excellent friend, Martin Rigal, and there you'll find our young protégé, Paul—Flavia's happy husband."

Having thus spoken, Mascarot drew himself erect, re-arranged his spectacles, and then turning once more to Catenac, exclaimed, "Now let's have no spite. Show your common sense, and do obeisance to Paul Gentran, Marquis de Champdoce."

Hortobize had of course foreseen this finish, having long been in Mascarot's confidence and having prepared part of the drama himself. Still he applauded as warmly as a simple spectator, and clapping his hands, called out, "Bravo, Baptistin! bravo!"

Paul, warned and prepared as he had been, had fallen back on his chair with his head swimming and his breath gone.

"Well, yes," exclaimed Mascarot, in a ringing voice, "I accept your praise without false modesty. We have no reason to fear even that grain of sand which sometimes interferes with the working of the best machinery. Success is certain. I have explained my combinations. If you find the slightest defect in any of them, tell me of it; it shall be remedied at once. Who is our most valuable tool? Perpignan, of course. And the vain fool will

serve us without knowing it. Can the duke have a suspicion after these minute investigations? It is impossible! But to remove the faintest shadow of doubt, I have an additional plan. I will make him go back over the whole ground. He himself shall take Paul to all these various places, and will obtain additional confirmation of everything that has been stated. Paul—Rigal's son-in-law, Flavia's husband—will be recognised in the Rue Montmartre, in the Rue Jacob, and the Rue de la Harpe. He will be recognised in the Rue d'Arras. Fritz will throw himself into the arms of 'the ungrateful fellow.' Vigoureux will remind him of his marvellous aptitude for trapeze exercises. The Lorgelins will press their dear Sans-Père to their hearts! And this will happen, Catenac, because the scent you will follow has been created by myself—because all those people, from mother Bregot back to the Lorgelins, are my slaves who dare not have any other will than mine. So triumph is certain. The twelve millions of the house of Champdoce will belong to us. You cannot say the contrary."

Catenac rose slowly and solemnly. "I admire your patience and your ingenuity Baptistin, only I am going, with one word, to overthrow the edifice of your hopes. I'm sorry for it, but it must be done."

Catenac might be a coward, he might be also a traitor, but he was none the less a clear-sighted counsellor. In former days, when they were all working cordially together, even Mascarot had at times relied on his perspicuity. Thus Hortebize shivered as he heard these words, though the advocate's smile was still as victorious as ever. "Speak on," he said to the advocate.

"Very well, then, Baptistin—old comrade—you will not overreach and deceive the duke."

Mascarot smiled pityingly. "Are you sure," he said, "that I wish to deceive him? You have not been frank with me, why should I be honest with you? Am I in the habit of confiding in those I can't trust. Does Perpignan suspect the role he is to play? Why may it not have suited me to keep from you the fact that Paul is really the child the duke seeks after?"

Mascarot spoke so seriously, and what he said was so singular, that Catenac stood with mouth and eyes wide open. His conscience was by no means clear, and he felt ill at ease. He himself had thought of treason, and might not his associates in their turn intend to betray him? He hastily weighed all the probabilities; but no, in all these combinations he could not detect any possible danger for himself. "I sincerely hope," he answered, in some degree regaining his self-possession, "that Paul is what you imply. But mark my words, the duke has an infallible means of preventing or rather of detecting any imposition. What can you expect? It is always so. The most trivial circumstance is sufficient to upset the most sagacious plans—to render the finest inspirations of genius useless."

The agent interrupted his associate. "Paul is the son of the Duc de Champdoce," said he gravely.

What did this mean? Catenac felt that he was being trifled with, and he was offended. "As you please," he answered; "but you will allow me, I trust, to convince myself of the truth?" So saying, the advocate approached Paul, and eagerly added, "Have the goodness, sir, to take off your coat."

Paul did as he was bid. "Now," resumed Catenac, "roll up the right sleeve of your shirt—higher still—to the shoulder." Hardly had the young man obeyed, and hardly had the lawyer glanced at his arm, than he turned to his associates, and said: "No it is not he!"

To his infinite astonishment, Mascarot and worthy Dr. Hortebize burst out laughing.

"No," he persisted, "no, this young man is not the abandoned child of the Duke de Champdoce, and the duke will recognise this truth even better than I. You laugh; because you don't know—"

"Enough!" interrupted the agent; and turning to the doctor, he added, "Explain to our loyal friend that we know a good many things."

Worthy M. Hortebize at once came forward, and with the bland semi-jocular air which he usually assumed when expatiating on the merits of homœopathy began, "You declare, Catenac, that our young friend here is not the man we say he is, simply because you don't find certain marks on his arm. However they'll be there, on the day that Paul is presented to the duke, and apparent enough to satisfy even incredulous Saint Thomas."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"Let me explain in my own fashion, if you please. If Paul had received on his shoulder a burn from boiling water in his childhood, a burn which removed the skin and occasioned a running sore, he would to-day have a large scar, the nature and peculiar form of which would denote its origin."

Catenac nodded. "Quite so," said he.

"Now, then, listen. I am going to take Paul home with me. I shall take him into my private office, where he will lie down. I shall give him ether, poor boy, for I don't wish him to suffer. Baptistin will help me. When Paul is asleep, I shall uncover his body and apply to his skin a bit of flannel, previously dipped in a liquid prepared according to a secret formula of my own. I'm not a fool, as perhaps you know. Well, this bit of flannel, which is already in my drawer, is artistically cut so as to simulate the excruciating course of a scalding burn inflicted by hot water falling from above, and straggling hither and thither. A few little scattered bits of flannel will in addition simulate the marks left by the splashes. Remember the carrier whom the duke's son was apprenticed to has been found out. He recollects what kind of a burn this was; and the scars I shall inflict will, as nearly as possible, tally with those that must have really resulted. Very well, then, I apply this flannel I spoke of—this blistering bandage—and when in eight or ten minutes it has done its work, I take it off and dress the sore according to my own method. Then I wake Paul up and we go to dinner."

B. Mascaret rubbed his hands.

"But," argued Catenac addressing the doctor, "you have not taken into consideration the fact that time is needed to give a scar a certain appearance—"

"Let me speak," interrupted the doctor. "If it were only time we needed—three months, six months, a year even—we should naturally enough postpone our denouement until then. But I can absolutely promise to show you in less than two months—thanks to a discovery of my own—a scar that will be entirely satisfactory, not possibly to an expert fellow practitioner, but quite so for a man like the duke. Ah! you see Catenac homœopathy has its merits after all."

The advocate reflected. Yes, his associates seemed to possess every element of success, and he began to regret his past hesitation. The Champdoce millions seemed to blaze before him and his eyes sparkled with unwonted fire. "May the devil fly away with all prejudices and scruples!" he suddenly exclaimed. "If we lose, we shall at least have played for high stakes. My friends, count on old Catenac—he's yours, body and soul. You are wise and I'm a fool!"

This time the doctor and Mascaret exchanged a look of triumph.

"Of course, however, we shall go shares," continued the lawyer. "I come in towards the end, it's true, but my work is delicate and important—in fact, you can do nothing without me."

"You will have your due share," answered the agent, evasively.

"One word more," said the advocate. "Are you sure that the duke has no other means of recognition?"

"Remember the duke has never even seen the infant, that it was carried away before the duchess even asked for it."

"But Jean saw it. Jean is still living, mind. He is eighty-seven and very infirm no doubt, but as soon as anything arises of interest to the Champdoce family—to which he has devoted his whole life—his intelligence revives."

"Well! And what then?"

"Why Jean, you know, opposed the substitution of another infant with all his strength. Isn't it possible that he may have foreseen just some emergency like the present one, and have prepared for it?"

The agent had become very grave. "I have thought of that," he said; "but what can be done?"

"I will ascertain," exclaimed Catenac. "Jean has entire confidence in me, and I will question him." The advocate seemed altogether changed. So lukewarm and hesitating before, he was now all zeal and eagerness.

"Well that point's settled, then, for the present," he continued. "But who can be certain that no one will recognise Paul as the person he really is?"

"I can be sure of that," answered B. Mascarot, "for I know how entirely his poverty isolated him from every one except a girl named Rose, who's now lodged at Saint-Lazare. She's the very girl you induced Gandelin the builder to file a complaint against. At one time I was a little anxious as I discovered that Paul had had a protector whom I did not know. But this protector turns out to be the Count de Mussidan, his father's murderer; for Paul is really the son of Montlouis."

"The conclusion is clear, then—there is nothing to fear in that direction," interposed the doctor.

"No, nothing. And now, while you attend to your duties, Catenac, I shall hasten Paul's marriage with Fiavia Rigal. But this will not prevent my attending to another operation, and before a month, Henri de Croisenois will have organised his company and have become the husband of Sabine de Mussidan."

"It would be as well to go to dinner, I think," now said the doctor, who was beginning to feel very peckish, and turning to the *protégé* of the association, he added, "Come on, Paul."

But Paul did not move, and then only did the three men perceive that the young fellow had fainted. They were obliged to bathe his head with cold water some time before he recovered his consciousness.

"Dear me!" said the doctor, "can it be that the idea of a little operation, which you will not even feel, has put you into this state?"

Paul shook his head sadly. "It isn't that," he answered.

"What then?"

"Simply," he answered, with a shiver, "that there exists some one—I know him—I know where he lives—"

"Who? What?" asked the partners, half thinking that the young fellow had gone mad.

"I know him, I tell you—the Duke de Champdoce's son."

Had a thunderbolt fallen at that moment into the office, it would not

have caused more stupefaction. "Let's see," said Mascarot, who was the first to come to his senses. "What do you mean? Explain yourself."

"Gentlemen, what you have just told me has enlightened me, and it is for that I felt so ill. I know a young man, of twenty-three, who was left at the Foundling Hospital of Vendôme, who ran away at the age of twelve and a half, and who has just such a scar as you described on his arm and shoulder. It came from a burn while he was apprenticed to a currier."

"And where is this young man?" asked the agent, quickly. "What does he do? What is his name?"

"He is a sculptor. His name is André, and he lives—"

Mascarot swore a horrible oath. "This is the third time," he exclaimed in a fury, "that this miserable fellow has crossed our path; but it shall be the last, I swear!"

Catenac and Hortebiz were deadly pale. "What do you mean to do?" they stammered.

"I shall do nothing," answered the agent, who with a great effort had regained at least a semblance of *sang froid*. "Only this fellow, André, is an ornamental sculptor, and often works at dizzy heights. Haven't you ever heard that the lives of people who work like that in mid-air, hang as it were on a mere thread?"

XXI.

WHEN Mascarot spoke of suppressing the man who hindered his projects, as simply as if it had been a question of snuffing out a candle, he was not aware that circumstances made his task no easy one. In point of fact, André was forewarned, and had been so ever since receiving from Sabine that despairing letter, in which she told him she was about to marry another man—that she was compelled to choose between him and the honour of her family. The young artist's apprehensions were strengthened, moreover, by the long conference he had with De Breulh-Faverlay, and the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon, when they had all come to the conclusion that the Count and Countess de Mussidan were the victims of an abominable conspiracy, planned by Henri de Croisenois. André did not know whence he might best expect the peril, but he vaguely realised that it hung over his head. Thus he prepared to defend himself. It was not only his life that was in danger, but his love and happiness as well.

M. de Breulh-Faverlay had strengthened the young fellow's distrust by remarking, "I would wage my fortune we have to contend against some gang of blackmailers. The misfortune is, we can't apply for the assistance of the police. In the first place, we have no positive proof to offer, and the police don't move a finger on mere surmises. In the next place, we should render a sorry service to those we wish to save, if we merely attracted the attention of the legal authorities. The secret of M. and Madame de Mussidan may be a terrible one—an indictable offence, indeed it is quite possible the police might intervene rather against them than in their favour. So let us be prudent. And you, André, have a care. Mistrust street corners at night time. Who knows but what some villain might spring out of a dark doorway and stab you?"

The result of this conversation was, that André and De Breulh decided for the present to cease seeing each other openly. They felt convinced that they were watched, and rightly opined that their intimacy would excite

the suspicion of De Croisenois, whom it was desirable they should lull into a sense of security. Accordingly, they determined to attach themselves, each in his own sphere, to the marquis's person, and arranged to meet of an evening, and exchange notes at a little café in the Champs Elysées, near the house where André worked.

The young painter's resolution was in no way daunted, but his first recklessness had passed away. He was a born diplomatist, and fully realised that he could only succeed in his task by dint of cunning. What should he do? There was his contract with M. Gandolu to attend to, and yet how could he superintend the men he had engaged, and watch De Croisenois at the same time? He must have money as well, and he was altogether unwilling to borrow from De Breulh. On the other hand, if he suddenly gave up his work, questions would naturally arise, and suspicion follow. Remembering M. Gandolu's kindness, André at last decided that the best thing he could do was to confide in the contractor, and so early the next morning he repaired to the Champs d'Antin.

To his great surprise, in the courtyard of the house, he met young M. Gaston, looking sadly woe-begone. The self-created "marquis" was by no means so carefully dressed as usual, and the disconsolate manner in which he was chewing a cigar stump, showed that he was altogether out of sorts. "Hallo," exclaimed the brilliant young "masher," "Here's my artist. Bet you ten louis that you have come to see my father on business."

"You are right. Is he at home?"

"Oh yes; he's at home, but he's sulking—he has locked himself in his room, and refuses to see me."

"You are just, of course?"

"I, in jest! not in the least. He's playing the tyrant, and, upon my word, it's altogether supremely ridiculous!"

As the groans, busy in the adjoining stable, could hear, the young man had sense enough to draw André aside. "Do you know," he resumed, "the governor has put me on short allowance. He swears he will insert an advertisement in the papers, to the effect that he declines to be responsible for my debts. But I can't think he will do it after all, for it would ruin me entirely—." At this thought poor Gaston heaved a bitter sigh. "You don't happen to have ten thousand francs to lend me, eh?" he suddenly asked the young artist. "If you have, I'll give you twenty thousand in return, when I come of age."

"I must admit, sir—" began André in surprise.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Gaston. "What a fool I am! Say nothing—I understand. You are an artist, of course, and if you had ten thousand francs you wouldn't be here. And yet I must have that amount; I gave certain notes to Verminet, and they're bothering me dreadfully. Do you know Verminet?"

"Not in the least."

"Where on earth do you come from then? Why, he's the manager of the Mutual Loan Society, my dear fellow. The only thing that troubles me is, that, at his suggestion, to facilitate matters I signed another person's name as endorsement."

"But that's forgery, man!" cried André, in alarm.

"Not at all—because I intend to pay; besides, I positively required the money for Van Klopen. You know Van Klopen, I suppose. No? Well, he's the man to dress a woman, and no mistake! I ordered three costumes of him for Zora. But after all, the governor's to blame for everything—"

why did he drive me to despair? Yes, he drove me to it. He did not content himself with abusing me, but he revenged himself on a poor innocent, defenceless woman, who never did him any harm—it was a cowardly, contemptible thing to do. Now, Zora—

"Zora," repeated André, to whom this name recalled nothing.

"Yes, Zora. You remember her—you came to take pot luck with us one day."

"Ah, yes—you mean Rose?"

"Precisely; but you know I don't like any one to call her by that name. Well, then, the governor went perfectly wild about her. Bet you twenty louis you don't know what he did? He filed a complaint against her for leading a minor astray. Truth! As if I were a fellow to be led by any one! But all the same, they arrested her and she's now in prison at Saint-Lazare." This heart-breaking idea brought tears to Gaston's eyes. "Poor Zora!" he resumed, with a moan. "I never cared much about women; but she really pleased me. What style she had! Her hairdresser told me he had never seen such hair as her's before. And yet she's at Saint-Lazare! When the men came to arrest her she thought of me at once, and cried out: 'The poor fellow will kill himself, I'm sure of it.' The cook told me so, and added that the poor dear girl was in such a state of agony, she actually spat blood! Think of that! And she's at Saint-Lazare now! I went to see if I could speak to her, but it was no use." At this point the young fellow was so afflicted that he actually began to sob.

"Courage, M. Gaston, courage!" said André kindly.

"Yes—to be sure. Oh! I'll have courage; and as soon as I'm of age I intend to marry her. You'll see. In the meantime, I don't consider my father altogether to blame, for he had been advised by his lawyer, a man named Catenac. Do you know him? No? Well, to-morrow I intend to call him out—I must select my seconds. By the way, will you be one? I can easily find a second one."

"I really know nothing of such matters."

"Then you wouldn't do, of course. Besides, I must have seconds whose looks and manner will frighten him a little."

"In that case—"

"I know what you mean. You think I had best find some military men. But, after all, the affair's simple enough: I'm the insulted party, and I choose pistols at ten paces. If he's afraid, then he will make the governor give up all his nonsense."

At any other moment André would no doubt have been amused by young Gaston's folly; but now he merely asked himself how he could best get rid of him. However, just at this moment a servant came out of the house and approached him, saying: "Monsieur, my master has seen you from his window, and begs you to go up to him."

"At once," answered André eagerly; and with a few words of encouragement and consolation he hurriedly took leave of the young "marquis."

XXII.

THE young artist found M. Gaudeln looking greatly changed. The contractor had evidently been weeping, for his eyes were red and swollen. However, at sight of André, his face brightened, and he half rose from his chair. "Ah! it's you!" he said, in a melancholy voice. "It does me

good to see you. I'm thankful for the good wind that blew you in this direction."

"It wasn't a good wind, sir," answered André, as he shook his head.

"What's the matter, then, André?" asked the contractor, now noticing how sad and solemn the young man looked.

"I am threatened with a great misfortune, sir."

"You! what are you saying?"

"Only the truth, sir. - And the consequences of this misfortune may be despair and death!"

"Holy Virgin!" exclaimed Gandelu, "is that really so? Ah! what a terrible thing life is. The wicked prosper, and honourable fellows are always in trouble. It's enough to doubt the existence of Providence. However, I'm your friend my lad, and if I can help you in any way it will be with pleasure."

"I came, sir, full of confidence, to ask you to do me a favour."

"Ah! you thought of me, then. Thanks for doing so; you make me feel quite happy. Give me your hand, André. I like to have a loyal manly hand in mine; it warms my poor lonely heart. Come tell me your trouble."

The young artist collected his thoughts. "It is the secret of my life, sir, that I am about to confide to you," he said, with some solemnity.

M. Gandelu did not speak, but with his clenched fist struck himself on the chest—the gesture guaranteeing his discretion better than any oath would have done. Accordingly, André no longer hesitated, but merely suppressing the names, he told the simple story of his love, his ambition and hopes, concluding with a clear statement of the present situation.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked M. Gandelu.

"Why, sir," said André, "allow me to turn the work you intrusted to me over to one of my friends. In appearance, I should still retain the responsibility and management, but in reality I should only be one of the workmen. This arrangement would give me my liberty to a certain extent, and, at the same time, allow me to earn something during a few hours every morning."

"And is that what you call a service?"

"Yes, sir; a service and a great favour."

"Why, my dear fellow, do what you like with the house. Pull it down if it pleases you. Who do you take me for? When Gandelu likes any one, half measures won't do. Dispose of me and my fortune too." Then rising, and opening a large iron safe in one corner of the room, he took out a packet of bank notes and laid it on the table before André. "You'll need the 'inews of war," said he. "Take this, it will be of help to you."

The kindness of this worthy man, who forgot his own troubles in his desire to relieve another, touched André to the heart. "But I don't need money, sir," he began.

Gandelu imposed silence with a gesture.

"Take these twenty thousand francs," he said; "'twill encourage me to tell you why I asked you to come upstairs to me."

It would have been most ungracious to refuse, so André accepted and waited to hear what the contractor had to say to him.

The old man had regained his seat and remained for some moments reflecting. "My dear André," he began at last. "You learned something of my sorrows, the other day. My son is a most unfortunate fellow, and, in fact, I've lost all esteem for him."

The young artist had already divined that his patron intended speaking of Gaston. "Your son is certainly very much in error, sir," he said; "but then remember how young he is."

Gandelu smiled sadly. "My son is old," he answered, "at least, old in vice. I have reflected and judged him. Yesterday he threatened to commit suicide. What preposterous nonsense! He hasn't enough courage to destroy himself. No, I'm rather afraid that he will end by dishonouring my name."

André shuddered; he remembered the forgeries which Gaston had just confessed to him.

"Up till now," resumed the contractor, "I have been foolishly weak—it is too late now to be severe. The boy is madly in love with a wretched woman named Rose, whom I have had shut up in jail. However, I have resolved to let her out, and at the same time I'll pay his debts. It's weak and cowardly on my part no doubt; but what can I do? After all I'm his father, and if I don't esteem, at least, I love him still. He has broken my heart no doubt, but its fragments belong to him."

André did not speak—he was appalled by the horrible sufferings which this resignation implied.

"I don't deceive myself," continued M. Gandelu, after a pause. "My son is lost. I can only try to attenuate his ruin in some degree. If this girl Rose is not altogether an unworthy creature, one might, perhaps, utilise her influence for good. But then, who will undertake the negotiations, and who can obtain from my son a sincere confession of his debts? I confess André, that I thought of you."

"And you did rightly, sir," rejoined the young painter. "I will speak to your son this very day, and to Rose as soon as she is at liberty."

It was absolute heroism on André's part to undertake to try and save young Gaston, for at this very moment he needed all his intelligence and energy for his own affairs. It seemed to him almost a crime to forget Sabine, who was threatened with the most terrible misfortune that can overtake a young girl; and yet, at the same time, he recognised that it was his duty to do what he could to aid this generous man, who had just placed in his hands the one element of success which he previously lacked.

Accordingly, he drew a chair to M. Gandelu's side, and they began to discuss what course they should pursue. Prudence and dissimulation were indispensable. The last events had so demoralized Gaston that anything could be obtained from him, providing he was not made acquainted with his father's real ideas and plans. Still it was necessary to make haste and profit of the young fellow's disposition. Finally, it was decided that André should have *carte blanche*, and that the old contractor should, to all appearance, stand firm in his original course, and only be led to gentler measures by slow degrees, through André's intercession.

Gaston, it may be mentioned, was even more morally crushed than André had imagined, and had been pacing up and down the courtyard in a state of despair, while his father had been talking with the young painter. As soon as the latter appeared on the steps, Gaston hurried to meet him.

"Well," he asked, breathlessly.

"Your father," answered André, "is naturally very irritated against you; nevertheless, I hope to induce him to grant some concessions."

"Will he set Zora at liberty?"

"Perhaps so."

Gaston gave vent to a joyful exclamation. "What luck!" he cried, and

after a wild kind of dance, he added, "I'll buy her a brongham, as soon as she comes out!"

André had foreseen some answer of the kind. "Softly, softly," said he. "If your father heard you, Madame Zora would probably remain where she is for a long time to come."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes I do. Your father will only set her free and pay your debts, providing you promise to alter your mode of life and be more reasonable in future."

"Oh, I'm ready to promise anything you like."

"No doubt you are; but then your father asks for something more than promises. He must have guarantees."

Those words considerably moderated Gaston's joy. "Guarantees?" he answered sulkily. "Isn't my word enough? What guarantees can my father ask for?"

"Ah! I can't tell you, you must suggest them yourself. I will propose them to him, and coming from me I'm quite sure he'll accept them."

Gaston looked at his companion in astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that you can make my father do anything you choose?" he asked.

"Not precisely; but you must see for yourself that I have a great deal of influence over him. Do you need a proof of it? Well, I've just obtained from him the money to pay those notes of your's."

"Verminet's, do you mean?"

"I suppose so. I speak of those which you were mad enough to endorse with another man's name."

For a moment Gaston averted his glance. Foolish as he was, his imprudence nevertheless made him feel very anxious. He vaguely realised that it might have terrible consequences, which even all his father's influence and wealth might be powerless to save him from. Still he strove to regain his assurance, and clapping his hands, exclaimed, "What! my father's parted with the coin! That's capital! Just give it me."

But André shook his head with a knowing smile. "Excuse me," said he, "the money won't leave my hands until I receive the notes. My orders on this point are precise; but the sooner we settle the affair and take up the notes the better."

M. Gaston did not reply at once. A grimace of disappointment followed his triumphant smile. "Come, that's really too bad," he said, at last. "My father's a cunning old fox, as Augustin said in the play the other night; but I suppose he must have his own way, so come on. I'll just put on an overcoat and go with you."

With these words he hurried into the house, whence he returned in less than a quarter of an hour, arrayed in all his usual splendour.

"It's in the Rue Sainte-Anne," he said, taking André's arm. "We'll walk if you don't mind."

It was, indeed, in that street that M. Isidore Verminet had installed the office of the "Mutual Loan Society," of which he was the sole director. The house he had selected and adorned with his name in gilt letters on a marble slab was far from attractive in appearance, and passers-by noticing its dirty front, its tumble down shutters and filthy windows, might well inquiringly exclaim, "What kind of business can be carried on in there?"

It is, indeed, scarcely easy to define M. Isidore Verminet's business. According to the prospectuses of the Mutual Loan Society, it was founded

with the sole object of procuring credit and money for those who never had any.

At first sight this would seem a very philanthropic but scarcely a practicable scheme; and yet Verminet's "financial system," to use one of his favourite expressions, was simplicity itself. Suppose some unfortunate tradesman on the eve of failure applied to him? Verminet began to console him, made him sign promissory notes for the sum he needed, and in exchange presented him with other notes, signed by some other tradesman equally on the verge of ruin.

To each of these unfortunate dealers he would say, "You can't discount your signature? All right. Well, here's another man's signature which is as good as gold, and which you can discount as easily as you might change a bank note."

This little bit of trickery performed, he pocketed his commission of two per cent. in ready cash on both transactions. To those whom a single signature did not satisfy he gave two, three, and four signatures. What did it matter to him, so long as his commission was forthcoming?

It may be asked how he obtained customers? But then it should be remembered that a luckless merchant, pursued by the phantom of failure, is ready to do anything; he seems to lose his head, and clutches at a signature like a drowning man at a blade of grass. At times this exchange of signatures succeeded for a few days. Some men whose real situation was known found credit on the strength of the signature of some other man whose position, although equally shaky, was less notorious. One thing is certain, application to Verminet robbed the luckless trader of his last chance of salvation.

However, the Mutual Loan Society transacted other business as well—business of even a less legitimate character than the foregoing. It dealt largely in purely "circulation notes," which were the terror and despair of bankers; and receivers in bankruptcy had a hard time of it with the fancy "shares" fabricated in the Rue Sainte-Anne.

But, at all events, whether the transactions of the society were moral or not, it at least seemed certain that Verminet made money.

XXIII.

GIFTED with that quick perception which artists of talent usually possess, André divined the character of the Mutual Loan Society by a mere look at the house.

"H'm," said he, "I hardly like this."

"To be sure," rejoined M. Gaston, looking as wise as he could. "To be sure the house isn't a handsome one, but it has its merits, I assure you. Ah! Verminet's a fellow who knows a thing or two!"

"So I should fancy," rejoined André; and indeed there could be but one opinion in regard to a person who was capable of taking advantage of the folly and ignorance of a simpleton like Gaston, to induce him to utter forged notes.

However, the young artist said nothing more, but quietly followed young Gaudelu, who was evidently familiar with the place. They turned down a long, narrow, dark, and ill-smelling passage, crossed a damp courtyard, and with the assistance of a sticky hand-rail, climbed a slippery, disjointed flight of stairs.

On reaching the second floor, Gaston paused in front of a door covered with various placards, announcing at what hours the office was open and the particular time to call for payment of accounts. "Here we are," said young Gandelu.

They entered a large, lofty room, the wall paper of which was soiled and torn. A light railing divided this apartment in two; on one side there being sundry benches for the accommodation of customers, whilst beyond, five or six clerks were feeding at their desks, for it was now the luncheon hour. The smell and heat of the stove, the perfume of the food, and the scent of the pomatum with which the clerks' heads were well greased, were well calculated to affect the olfactory senses of new comers, and André was at first almost overcome with nausea.

"Where is Monsieur Verminet?" asked Gaston with an air of authority.

"Busy," carelessly answered one of the clerks with his mouth full.

This reception angered young Gandelu beyond expression. "Oh!" said he; "what do you mean? None of that behaviour, come." And producing one of his address cards, bearing the coronet which so exasperated his worthy father, he added, "Whether Verminet's busy or not, just go and tell him that I want to see him—I, Gaston de Gandelu."

The clerk was so impressed by the young fellow's conceited air, that, without another word of objection, he took up the card and disappeared through a door in the rear. This was quite a victory for Gaston, and he glanced at André with a proud smile.

In a moment the clerk reappeared. "Monsieur Verminet is at this moment much occupied with a client; he begs you to excuse him, and wait a few minutes—he will receive you presently." And anxious, probably, to win the favour of such a distinguished mortal as young M. Gaston, he added deferentially, "My master is with the Marquis de Croisenois."

"Think of that, now!" cried Gaston, turning to André. "Why, Croisenois is a particular friend of mine. Bet you ten louis he would be only too delighted to shake hands with me!"

André had started, and his face had flushed when he heard this name of Croisenois. Croisenois! 'Twas the very man whom he loathed and hated above all others; the wretch who, armed with some stolen secret, was constraining Sabine de Mussidan to marry him. It was the scoundrel whom M. de Brault-Faverlay, Madame de Bois d'Ardon, and himself had sworn to unmask. So far, André had never seen the marquis. He had intended that very day to begin his supervision, watch and follow him, note his present life and inquire into his past; but as yet he was physically unacquainted with him. The young artist trembled with eagerness at the thought that a mere door separated him from his mortal foe, that he was about to meet him, see him pass along, and maybe hear his voice. André could barely conceal the emotion he felt; but fortunately his companion did not notice it.

Gaston had, in fact, sat down, and crossing his legs and adjusting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, he was offering himself to the admiration of the ill-fed, slovenly-looking clerks behind the railing.

"You know this dear marquis, I presume?" he asked André in a voice loud enough to be heard by the clerks.

André's reply was fairly unintelligible; but Gaston accepted it as a negative. "But you must have heard of him?" he urged. "Where in the world do you live, then? Henri de Croisenois is one of my best friends. Why, he still owes me the bagatelle of fifty louis that I won from him one night at Ernestine's."

André was not listening. He was blessing chance, or rather Providence, which in its mysterious ways so greatly helped him in his task. He was on the track at last. He felt sure that he had judged Verminet rightly, and, in that case, Croisenois' connection with this shady personage was highly significant. The matter must be investigated. Hitherto, André had been in darkness, but now he beheld a gleam of light. He had been on the point of rushing hither and thither, in hap-hazard fashion, and now it seemed as if he held the end of a string which would guide him through the labyrinth of Croisenois' iniquities.

Moreover, it so chanced that young Gaston was personally acquainted with the marquis. Might he not therefore obtain some information from him? "So you are intimate with M. de Croisenois?" he asked.

"Intimate! I should rather say I was!" answered young Gandelu. "Just ask Adolphe at Brébant's about us! By you shall see for yourself hy-and-tye. I'm on the best possible terms with a lady who costs him a pretty penny, though I've never given her a sou myself. However, it's a mystery—"

He stopped short, for at that moment the door of the manager's office opened, and Verminet and the marquis appeared on the threshold.

Henri de Croisenois wore a fashionable, elegant morning costume. As usual, he had a cigar in his mouth, and he twirled in his well-gloved hand a light cane with a gold knob. At one glance, but a glance in which André concentrated all his intelligence, he saw enough of Croisenois never to forget him, no matter how long he might live. He considered that the marquis had a false, traitor-like look, and divining that his carelessness and scepticism were merely affected, realised that he must be a man of determination, coldly cruel and expert in villainy. The marquis's eyes particularly struck the young painter. They were restless, ever on the *qui vive*, like the eyes of a man who, having committed a crime, knows he must remain on his guard; for danger may spring up on all sides at any moment. Seen a short distance off, the marquis, with his coquettish silky moustache, seemed yet a young man; but André's artist eyes were not to be deceived. This fellow was plainly a rake, and cold cream and rice powder alone attenuated the stigmas of vice. Gambling and debauchery, and the anxieties of a precarious existence, had wrinkled his temples, tampered with his hair, creased his eyelids, and divested his lips of their youthful ruddiness. All this was evident, albeit, that the marquis plainly had recourse to the most approved artifices of the toilette table.

For the nonce, Croisenois seemed to be in the best possible humour, and it was right gaily that he finished his conversation with Verminet. "Then it's understood," said he; "I haven't to bother myself about the matters which only concern ourselves."

"Quite so; I'll see to them."

"Pray don't forget. The least delay or forgetfulness might have serious consequences."

This caution seemed to suggest an idea to Verminet, for he said something in a low voice to his client, whereupon they both laughed.

Gaston felt considerably disconcerted at not having been immediately recognised, and soon, unable to control himself, he advanced towards M. de Croisenois, at the risk of interrupting the latter's conversation. "Eh, eh!" said the brilliant youth with a conceited smile. "The dear marquis indeed! 'Pon my word, 'tis a long time since I've seen you. And Sarah, how is she? Does she still give some of those nice little card parties?"

If the marquis was pleased at meeting Gandelu, he certainly did not show it. He seemed surprised—he frowned, in fact, and just extended his gloved hand with a careless, "Glad to see you."

This was all, and then, with small ceremony, he turned his back on Gaston and continued his conversation with Verminet. "As regards the other matter, all the difficulties are conquered," he said, "and so there is not a moment to lose. You must see the banker, Martin Rigal, and Mascaret to-day."

André started. Were these people accomplices of Croisenois? He saw accomplices everywhere now, to be sure! At all events, these names remained engraven in his memory.

"Tautaine was here this morning," answered Verminet, "and gave me an appointment to see his master at four this afternoon—Van Klopen will be there, too. Shall I speak to him for your fair friend?"

The marquis shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. "Upon my word!" he said, "I had nearly forgotten her! After all, it's carnival time; she will be wanting silks and laces. Speak to Van Klopen by all means, but no extravagance, mind. Remember that I don't care a sou for Sarah's whims, now."

"I understand," rejoined Verminet; "but be cautious. Don't have any quarrel—keep things as smooth as possible with her; an amicable separation would be best."

"Certainly—to be sure," answered Croisenois, and after shaking hands with the manager of the Mutual Loan Society, he walked swiftly across the office, just touching his hat to Gaston, and altogether ignoring André's presence. However, the young artist was by no means offended, quite the reverse; for he was doing his best to escape attention.

"At your orders, gentlemen!" now exclaimed Verminet. "Walk in, please. Excuse me, but greatly hurried. One o'clock already—not been to Bourse yet—customers anxious."

When André and Gaston had entered the private room, the financier sat down in his leather-covered arm-chair. He was better than his office. In the first place, he was clean; in the next, his clothes did credit to his tailor. Was he young or old? Who could say? His age was no more apparent than that of a five-franc piece. He was plump and fresh, pink and white; wore English whiskers, and had a pair of vitreous eyes, as expressionless as a cellar window. His great preoccupation was to seem a serious, very serious man, well acquainted with the value of all things; and it was because he was so convinced of the axiom that "time is money," that he usually spoke in a curt, telegraphic style.

Young Gandelu was also in a hurry. "One word, if you please—as Geoffroy said in the play the other night—one word. You lent me some money last week—"

"Precisely. Do you want some more?"

"No. I wish, on the contrary, to take up my notes."

A cloud came over Verminet's face. "The first payment isn't due until the fifteenth," he said.

"That's no matter; I have the money now, and so, you understand, I should like to take them up."

"Impossible."

"Eh! Impossible! Why, pray?"

"Negotiated!"

Gaston started with surprise. "Come, you don't mean it?" he stam-

merci. "You've negotiated them! It can't be. That's too much of a joke; for of course, Verminet, you're joking!"

"Joking! Oh! no, indeed; I never joke."

The young fellow could not believe his ears, could not imagine that this statement was serious, and his surprise and alarm could be read in his eyes. "Come now," said he, "don't play the fool. You know very well that when I signed those notes, it was agreed they should never leave your hands—it was so understood by both of us. You promised—"

"I don't say the contrary. But to make a promise and keep it are very different things. I was compelled—needed money—some one ready and so disposed of the notes—"

André was not surprised by this answer, for to tell the truth he had anticipated something of the kind, and seeing that Gaston had now utterly lost his head, he thought it advisable to intervene.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, to the laconic director, "but it seems to me that certain circumstances—peculiar circumstances—should have made you respect your agreement."

Verminet made a stiff bow, and, instead of replying directly, asked, "Honour of speaking to whom?"

André, who was becoming more and more suspicious, thought it prudent not to give his name.

"I am a friend of M. Gandelu's," he said evasively.

"In his confidence?"

"Quite so; you lent him I think, ten thousand francs—"

"Excuse me, five thousand—"

André turned in astonishment to his companion, who grew crimson.

"What does this mean?" asked the artist.

"Can't you see? I said ten thousand, because I needed the difference for Zora."

"Ah, indeed!" answered André, lifting his eyebrows slightly. "Then M. Verminet, it was five thousand francs you lent M. Gandelu. That was natural enough. But it was not so natural, in my opinion, that you should have induced him to forge a signature."

Verminet started off his chair, "I!" he answered, "I didn't know it was a forgery!"

This impudent denial aroused poor Gaston from the stupor into which he had fallen. "That's too strong," he cried, "altogether too strong! Did you not yourself tell me, Verminet, that for your own personal safety you must insist on another name in addition to mine? Did you not yourself hand me a letter, and say to me, 'Imitate the signature—it's that of Martin Rigal, the banker, in the Rue Montmartre?' I didn't want to do it, but you declared it was a mere formality so as to make sure I should pay you punctually. And besides, you declared the notes should never leave your drawer. Now, however, you deny it. Come, that's hardly delicate and I'm quite surprised at you."

The honourable director of the Mutual Loan Society listened with a frozen air. "False accusation—absence of proofs," he said at last. "Society will be capable of any act punishable by law."

"And yet, sir," insisted André, "you had no hesitation in putting that notes into circulation. Have you calculated the frightful consequences of this breach of faith? What would happen if this forged signature were sent to M. Martin Rigal?"

"Unlikely—notes signed Gandelu; endorsed, Rigal. Notes, when due, are always presented to person signing them."

Gaston indulged in violent recriminations, but André realised that further discussion was useless. Plainly enough a trap had been set for young Gandelu, though with what object the artist could not divine. "Enough words," said he at last, "we have but one thing to do, we must follow these notes and take them up."

"Right!"

"But to do this, you must first tell us to whom you disposed of them."

Verminet waved his hands like a person whose memory is at fault. "Don't know, I'm sure," said he; "forgotten!"

André had promised himself he would be patient and remain calm. But human forbearance has its limits, and the cool cheek of this scoundrel, Verminet, proved too much for his good resolution. "Come," said he, in a tone of concentrated fury, "in that case, it would be greatly to your interest if you made an energetic appeal to your memory—"

"Threats!"

"And if this appeal be unsuccessful," resumed André, "the consequences may prove very serious indeed for you."

It was easy to see that the young painter was in earnest, and Verminet rose exclaiming, "I'll look through the books in the next room."

He evidently meant to slink off, but André was too quick for him, and stationed himself in front of the door. "Oh! you can find the information here, without leaving the room," said he; "and, by Jove! I advise you to make haste."

For a couple of minutes these two men stood motionless, looking at each other, Verminet green with fear and André pale with anger.

"If this villain lifts a finger," thought André, quite beside himself, "I will pitch him out of the window."

"This big fellow's a positive Hercules," thought Verminet; "and he looks as if he were capable of anything."

The idea of summoning his clerks to his assistance occurred to him, but he dismissed it for reasons André could not suspect. Finding himself caught, he resolved to yield, and, suddenly striking his forehead, exclaimed, "How forgetful of me! I have memoranda there." He hastened to his desk, drew a large diary from a drawer, and began turning over the leaves. André who was hard by saw that the volume was upside down. Still, with marvellous affectation, Verminet pretended to have found what he was seeking.

"Ah," said he, "here it is! Notes for five thousand francs, Gandelu and Rigal—transferred to Van Klopen, the ladies' tailor."

André was silent. A remark of Croisenois' had informed him that Verminet had dealings both with Van Klopen and Martin Rigal. Now, why had the bill discounter proposed Rigal's signature to Gaston, as the one he should imitate? and why had he passed these same notes over to Van Klopen? Was it mere accident that had prompted the selection of these names? No! some secret tie must exist between these three men and the

"Is de Croisenois. Of that, André felt as good as certain. "Should his all?" asked the director of the Mutual Loan Society. "Are implied."

"Eh, Van Klopen still got the notes?" inquired Gaston.

"Negotiated, I'm sure."

Gaston started, said André, "he will tell us where they are."

They immediately withdrew, and as soon as they reached the street, the young artist caught his companion by the arm and hurried him along in the direction of the Rue de Grammont.

"I don't wish this Verminet to have time to warn Van Klopen of our intentions," said he. "I mean to fall upon him like a bullet."

XXIV.

HAD André been better informed, he would have known that no one ever fell like a bullet on Van Klopen.

Entrénched in the innermost sanctuary of his inspirations, this fashionable tyrant was well nigh as inaccessible as an Asiatic despot in the depths of his harem. The women, his customers, at times managed to escape the probation of the waiting-room, but masculine visitors never. And this was but natural, for the latter were usually indignant husbands whom the illustrious ladies' tailor had good reason to fear.

Accordingly when Gaston and André, out of breath, reached the ante-room, they were confronted by two stalwart footmen, whose gold-laced liveries were eloquent indications of their master's prosperity.

"Monsieur Van Klopen is engaged," they said.

"But our business is most important," urged André.

"Our master is working."

Prayers, threats, and even the offer of a hundred francs, proved all in vain. André saw that he was about to be check-mated, and was tempted to take the footmen by their collars and dash them aside; but he had already repented of his anger at Verminet's. Reluctantly enough he decided to submit and wait, and followed by Gaston he entered the famous salon which Van Klopen called his "purgatory."

"While we are dawdling here," thought the young artist, "Verminet will have time to warn this dressmaker, and we sha'n't learn anything."

However, the footmen had told the truth, Van Klopen was really working, and in the salon several women of the highest fashion were awaiting the good pleasure of this glass of fashion and mould of form. They all turned with surprise as the two young men entered the room—all but one, who sitting beside a window was looking idly into the street, and drumming lightly on the glass with her pretty fingers. However, it was precisely this lady who attracted André's attention, for to his infinite surprise he recognised Madame de Bois d'Ardon.

"Is it possible?" he said to himself. "Can the viscountess have come here again, after the infamous manner in which Van Klopen treated her. So De Breulh was mistaken when he said she would prove a devoted ally."

In the meantime young Gandelu, realising that five pair of eyes were watching him, selected the most graceful posture he could, and complacently allowed himself to be admired.

André from amazement soon passed to disgust and indignation. "I will learn the truth at any cost," he said to himself, and rising from his chair, careless of the presence of so many strangers, and without reflecting that he might grievously compromise the viscountess, he crossed the salon and approached her with a low bow. But she was absorbed in something that was going on in the street and did not turn.

"Madame la Vicomtesse," said André.

At the sound of his voice she started—and when she looked round and recognised him, she could not restrain an exclamation of surprise. “Heavens! Is it you!”

“Yes, it is I—here.”

The look which accompanied his words was so expressive, that Madame de Bois d’Ardon, divining his thoughts, flushed scarlet. “My presence here astonishes you,” she said, “and you think I have little memory, and less pride.”

André did not answer, his silence was a sufficiently significant reply.

“Let me tell you, then,” continued the viscountess with a reproachful look, “you do me great injustice. If I’m here, it’s because De Breulh this very morning told me that in the interest of your projects, I ought to forgive Van Klopen and come here as I did before. You see, Monsieur André, it is never safe to judge by appearances—a woman above all things.”

“Will you ever forgive me, madame?” replied the young artist in an earnest tone.

With a rapid gesture which he alone could see she cut his apologies and protestations short. Clearly enough this gesture implied: “Take care, we are being looked at.”

At the same time she turned her face to the window and André did the same. By this means their features at least escaped observation. Their conversation had been carried on in too low a tone for anyone to overhear it, and the other ladies looked intensely scandalised at what they considered a preconcerted rendezvous. As for young M. Gaston he was overcome with jealousy. “Why that artist pretended to be virtuous,” he muttered. “But, dear me, this looks rather the reverse.”

In the meanwhile, the viscountess had resumed speaking. “De Breulh,” said she, “has found out several things about M. de Croisenois, and nothing to his credit. However, in the present case, this information would not suffice, for it is clear that De Mussidan has a knife at his throat. We must rake out of the past some really infamous act of this man’s, the revelation of which will force him to withdraw of himself.”

“I shall find one,” muttered André between his teeth.

“But, my dear sir, there is no time to lose. According to our agreement, I am altogether charming to him; he thinks I am entirely devoted to his interests, and to-morrow I have agreed to present him to the Mussidans. The count and countess have promised to receive him.”

André started, and was barely able to restrain a gesture of rage.

“As soon as I saw the Mussidans,” resumed Madame de Bois d’Ardon, “I realised that you were quite right in your opinion: in the first place, Mussidan and his wife, who always lived on the most wretched terms, are now most friendly, almost affectionate towards each other, as if they felt that they could best resist danger by remaining united. Then, their faces are careworn and anxious—they watch their daughter with the saddest, dearest eyes. I think they regard her as their salvation, and deplore the necessity of the sacrifice!”

“And she?” asked André eagerly.

“She is sublime—yes, sublime! She accepts the sacrifice, which she has decided on, fully and entirely, without a word, without a murmur. Her devotion is admirable, and so great is her heroism, that she hides from her parents the real extent and the horror of her sacrifice. Noble girl! She is calm and grave as she always was, but not more than usual. Perhaps she is a little thinner and a trifle paler. When I kissed her, her forehead

was so hot that it fairly burned my lips. But except that, nothing betrayed her sufferings. Modeste told me, however, that her poor young mistress was merely playing a part, affecting calmness she did not feel. At night time, said Modeste, Sabine is utterly exhausted; and the poor girl wept as she told me that her poor mistress was killing herself!"

Big tears pearded forth from André's eyes. "What can I do," he said, "to deserve such a woman?"

But at this moment a door opened, and the young artist and the viscountess turned round abruptly. It was Van Klopen coming from his sanctum, after dismissing the customer with whom he had just been engaged. "Well! whose turn is it next?" asked the illustrious ladies' tailor, in his usual brutal style.

But when he saw Gaston his face changed, and it was with the most amiable smile that he went towards him, waving away the patient lady, whose turn it should have been, and who protested against the injustice.

"Ah!" said Van Klopen, in a gay, good-natured tone, "you have come, I presume, M. Gandelu, to order some surprise for that exquisite creature, Zora de Chantemille?"

This may have been unintentional irony, but it was none the less extremely bitter for poor Gaston, who heaved a terrible sigh. "Not just now," he answered. "Zora is not quite well."

But André, who had arranged the little story he intended to lay before the mighty Van Klopen, was in too great a hurry to waste time in useless chatter. "We have come," he said, hastily, as soon as they had reached the privacy of the modern Mantilini's sanctum, "on a matter of importance. My friend, M. Gandelu, is about to leave Paris for some months, and, before leaving, he is desirous of withdrawing all his notes of hand from circulation, for his father would be very displeased if he knew he had been discounting his signature."

"I can understand that."

"Well, sir, you can be very useful to him."

Intelligent M. Gaston already considered himself saved. "Come, Van Klopen," said he, "pray let us have the notes of mine you received from Verminet."

The illustrious ladies' tailor looked perplexed. "Yes, I remember those notes," he said slowly. "I had them once—five notes of a thousand francs each, signed Gandelu, and endorsed by Martin Rigal. I received them from the Mutual Loan Society, as you say, but I have them no longer."

"Is that really so?" murmured Gaston, faintly.

"Yes; I sent them in part payment to my ribbon merchants at Saint Etienne—Rollon, Vrac, & Co."

Van Klopen was certainly a clever rogue, but, born at Rotterdam, he was, like most other Dutchmen, deficient in a certain *finesse* of detail; and, besides, apart from his extraordinary professional impudence, he was easily disconcerted. In proof of this, André's fixed stare so worried him that he added, "If you don't believe me I can show you these gentlemen's acknowledgment."

"It is not necessary, sir," answered André; "your word is sufficient."

"And I certainly give it to you, sir. Nevertheless, I should like to show you the letter." And he began turning over a pile of papers on his desk.

"Oh! don't take so much trouble, pray," said André, quietly, as if he were really duped by this comedy, which was far from being the case. "It can't be helped. The notes are at Saint Etienne; I am sorry for it.

However, we will wait until they come due. M. Gandelu won't disinherit his son for that. I have the honour of wishing you a very good morning."

In reality, the young artist's blood was boiling in his veins, and he feared he should not long be able to control himself. So, although Gaston was anxious to consult Van Klopen about sundry dresses for Zora when she left Saint-Lazare, André hastily dragged him away from the tailor's sanctum. He paused when they were in the street, and more as a mere formality than anything else, just jotted down the name of Van Klopen's ribbon people. Then turning to Gandelu he asked, "What do you think of your man-dressmaker?"

Gaston now felt quite comfortable. "I think," he said, "that Van Klopen's no fool. He knows me. As Philippe says in the play, I'm a good fellow, but I don't care for practical jokes."

"Then where do you think your notes are?"

"At Saint Etienne, of course."

Young Gandelu's obstinate confidence elicited from André a gesture of impatient commiseration. He could not understand such idiotic simplicity on the part of a young fellow who moved in one of the most corrupt circles of Parisian life. "Come," said he, looking at his watch when they had reached the corner of the Rue de Richelieu, "it's three o'clock, and I've still another quarter of an hour to give you. Now listen to me, and try, if you can, to realise the frightful position you stand in."

"I'm listening, my dear fellow; go on."

"It was because Van Klopen refused to give you longer credit—in fact, it was in order to pay him that you applied to Verminet?"

"Precisely."

"Then how do you explain the fact that this same man, who, on Monday, did not think your credit good enough to open an account with you, should, on Wednesday, accept your notes from Verminet, with the intention of sending them to his manufacturers?"

The objection was so forcible, and it so clearly defined the situation, that even obtuse M. Gaston was struck by it. It was like a sun ray piercing suddenly through the fog that obscured his mind.

"The donee!" he muttered, anxiously. "I never thought of that; it's queer. Does he mean to do me a bad turn—he, Van Klopen, or Verminet?"

"It is clear to me that the two together have a charming little project of blackmailing you."

This expression seemed peculiarly offensive to Gaston, who indignantly exclaimed, "Blackmail me! Indeed they won't. I know a trick worth two of that, and they won't make much out of me."

André shrugged his shoulders. "Then," he said, "have the goodness to tell me what you propose to say to Verminet when, the day your notes are due, he comes to you and says, 'Give me a hundred thousand francs for these five bits of paper, or I shall take them to your father!'"

"I should say—well, upon my word, I don't know what I should say."

"You could say nothing at all. You would realise that you have been imposed on in the most shameful manner, and you would implore Verminet to wait, as he would no doubt consent to do, providing you agreed to give him a hundred thousand francs the day you came of age."

"A hundred thousand fiddle strings! that's all Verminet will get from me! That's my way, you see. If people treat me badly, I am apt to kick and upset their plans. Pay this fellow! No, not I. I know very well there

would be a tremendous row with the governor; but rather than knuckle down to Verminet I'd bolt."

The young fellow was no doubt very indignant, and yet such was the force of habit that he could only express his feelings in this slangy style.

"I think," resumed André, "that your father would forgive you this—imprudence, though it would no doubt be even harder for him to do so than it was when he forgave you for engaging a physician to count how many hours he still had to live. But, after all, he *would* forgive you, I've no doubt; for he's your father—and he loves you."

"Of course. Let Verminet go to the deuce!"

"By no means," insisted André. "If Verminet discovered you were not afraid of your father, he would threaten you with someone else—in fact, with the public prosecutor—"

Gaston stopped short, and looked aghast. "Come, now," said he, "you're joking."

"By no means. This isn't a joke—this is forgery, and a forgery, when it's detected, means, first of all, the assize court, and afterwards the galleys."

Gaston had become ghastly pale, and shook like a leaf from head to foot. "The galleys!" he stammered. "No, I won't stand that. Anatole says a man may get along pretty comfortably there, providing he's protected; but no, I'd rather not try." He reflected for a moment, then, with sudden violence, resumed: "They've got me in a corner have they? Well, all the same, they shan't blackmail me! I'll do like Cartex did—invite all my friends to a grand dinner, and then, just after the coffee, blow my brains out. 'Twould be a splendid advertisement for the restaurant. All the women would be begging the waiters to let them dine in the same private room. Yes, that's what I'll do; to be sure I will. And besides, I'll prepare a witty letter for the newspapers. It shall be found on my body when I'm dead!"

Gaston seemingly forgot he was on the Boulevards, for he raised his shrill, falsetto voice well-nigh to its full pitch, and gesticulated furiously. Several passers-by turned, and looked at him in astonishment; but André, fearful of a scene, managed to drag him on.

"Ah, me!" said Gaston, resuming his soliloquy in a lower voice, "after all, I pity the governor; it might kill him, you know. I might have made him so happy, and yet I've proved such a torment. Ah! if I could begin life again—but of course it can't be. What a fix! And at my age too. Rich and fashionable, loved by a woman like Zora, and compelled to turn off the gas all the same. It isn't a nice look out. But then the assizes—no, I can't stand that! I much prefer a bullet! After all, I'm the son of an honest man."

In his turn André paused, examining his companion much as a professor of vivisection might examine some animal he was experimenting on. "Do you really mean what you say?" he asked.

"To be sure I do. I can be serious sometimes." And, really, resolution seemed to sparkle in young Gandelu's eyes.

"Well, don't despair yet a while," said André. "I think that we may be able to arrange this unfortunate affair, only you cannot be too prudent. Keep quiet, and by all means remember that I may have imperative need of you at almost any moment."

"Agreed! But look here, I can't make up my mind to abandon Zora."

"Do not be troubled, I will see her to-morrow. And now, good-bye for

to-day; I've not another minute to lose." So speaking, and leaving Gaston still in a state of confusion, André rushed away.

The reason for his excessive haste was that he had heard Verminet say to Croisenois, "I shall see Mascarot at four o'clock," and he had taken it into his head that he would wait until he saw the director of the Mutual Loan Society leave his office, and then follow him. In this way he hoped to get at Mascarot, whom he had already decided must be an accomplice of some kind. He sped down the Rue de Grammont like an arrow, and half-past three was striking at the Imperial Library in the Rue Richelieu when he reached the Rue Sainte Anne. He breathed again, and recollecting that he had not lunched, looked round him for some place where he might break a crust. Just in front of the office of the Mutual Loan Society there happened to be a wine shop. André entered, and asked for two sous' worth of bread, a slice of ham, and a pint of wine. He paid his score in advance, so that nothing might delay him in starting after Verminet as soon as the latter appeared; and then taking up his stand near the window, he began to eat, at the same time keeping his eyes fixed on the opposite side of the way. He was somewhat anxious, for Verminet had also said that he intended going to the Bourse. Would he return home after he had been there, and before he went to see Mascarot? All depended on this. If he did, André would be able to carry out his plans; if not, his hour of waiting was lost. It was not lost, however, for just as he had finished his bread and ham, he caught sight of Verminet leaving his office. At one gulp André swallowed his wine and rushed out after him.

XXV.

As seen in the street, Verminet appeared to be a highly successful man, a capitalist, the fortunate manager of a thriving and lucrative business. He walked along in a jaunty style, with head erect and smiling face, glancing at the shops with the air of a millionaire able to purchase the whole of their contents, and ogling all the good-looking women he met, in the most impertinent style. André had no difficulty in following him, although he was entirely new to the profession of a *filleur*, which is a more difficult matter than is generally supposed, although, like most other things, it has its recognised rules, which simplify it wonderfully.

Profiting of the fine weather, the director of the Mutual Loan Society chose the longest route, like a man with a quiet conscience, who, after a day's hard work, allows himself the recreation of a stroll. Thus, instead of taking the Rue Neuve des Petits Champs he gained the Boulevards, and walked on enjoying his cigar, and constantly bowing to the right or left, or exchanging shakes of the hand. André, who was not more than fifteen paces behind, kept his man well in sight, and wondered at the many persons who knew this surprising financier. Somewhat disconcerted, he asked himself, "Am I mistaken? A man scarcely sees aright when he looks through the prism of passion. This fellow may not be what I suppose. Have I taken the chimeras of my imagination for positive evidence?" In point of fact, André had no knowledge of that large fraction of Parisian society which forgives every sin, providing the sinner be well off—the society that always bows to a man with a plethoric purse, no matter how he may have filled it.

Meanwhile, Verminet, having reached the Boulevard Poissonnière, threw

away his cigar, and changed his air and walk. He walked rapidly along the Rue du Petit Carreau, and having almost reached the end of the Rue Montorgueil, near the Halles, he suddenly stopped short and disappeared under a vast *porte-cochère*. André had only to glance at the boards on either side of the door to ascertain where the financier had gone. He had gone into the office of B. Mascarot, and this Mascarot simply kept an employment agency. André had expected a more brilliant, certainly a more significant, discovery, and he felt somewhat disconcerted. Still he determined to wait for Verminet, and to give himself an air of doing something, he crossed the street, without losing sight of Mascarot's door, and pretended to be absorbed in watching three men who were sitting sliding shutters to the shop-windows of a new house. However, André was not obliged to wait long. In less than a quarter of an hour he saw Verminet come out with two men—one of them tall and thin, wearing coloured glasses; the other, stout, smiling, and ruddy, with the air and bearing of a man of the world. They all three advanced from under the *porte-cochère*, and, standing on the kerbstone, remained talking with no little animation.

André would have given half of the twenty thousand francs in his pocket to have heard their conversation, or at least some portion of it, and he was executing an adroit manoeuvre destined to bring him closer to the group, when, suddenly, two sharp shrill whistles resounded above the hum of the street traffic. These whistles were so oddly modulated that they struck André, and he was not the only one to notice them, for the tall, thin, spectacled personage who was talking to Verminet started, and looked hastily around. Hidden behind several passers-by, however, André still advanced, when suddenly the three men he was watching separated. The man with the spectacles went into the house again, while Verminet and the stout fashionable-looking man walked away together.

André hesitated. Should he try and find out who these men were? There was a young chestnut vendor under the *porte cochère*. Could he not first find out something from him?

"No," he thought, "that fellow will always be there, while I shall never, perhaps, get hold of Verminet again, so I had best begin by following him."

So saying, he started in pursuit of the director of the Mutual Loan Society, who, with his jovial-looking companion, walked down the dark passage of the Reine de Hongrie, and turning to the right in the Rue Montmartre entered a handsome-looking house. Whom had they gone to visit? A man with any experience in detective business would not have been embarrassed, but the young painter was extremely so, until as he got nearer he espied at the end of the vestibule a marble slab bearing the words: "Office on the first floor." This was a ray of light. "Ah!" he thought, "the banker Martin Rigal must live here."

He entered and questioned the concierge, and ascertained that his surmise was a correct one. "Upon my word," he thought, "I'm in luck to-day. And now if that young chestnut vendor can only tell me the names of Verminet's companions I shall have done well. It is to be hoped he hasn't gone."

Not only was he still there, but he had a companion with whom he was so eagerly disputing, that André's presence remained for a moment unnoticed. "Come now," said the young chestnut dealer, to his "pal," "that's enough beating about the bush. I told your guv'nor just what I'd

do. You want my place, and furnace, eh? Well, you can have 'em for two hundred and fifty francs."

"But the old boy will only give two hundred."

"Then he may go to blazes. Two hundred francs for a place like mine! Why, some days I've made ten francs, and over—I give you my word for it, the word of Toto-Chupin."

Toto-Chupin! Yes, the chestnut vendor was our familiar young friend. This name tickled André's fancy, and without more ado he spoke to the young scamp. "I say, my good fellow," he exclaimed, "you were here just now. Did you happen to notice three gentlemen who came out of this house, and stood talking together for a few minutes?"

Toto turned, and with an insolent air surveyed the person who had presumed to interrupt him; then in a brutal tone, he replied: "What can it matter to you? Mind your own business, and go your own way."

André was acquainted with more than one specimen of the engaging class to which Toto Chupin belonged. He knew the language and the ways of the *gamins de Paris*, and so he resumed. "Well, you might as well answer, it wouldn't burn your tongue."

"Well, yes, I saw them. What then?"

"What then? Why, I should like to know their names, if you happen to know them yourself."

Toto-Chupin lifted his cap and scratched his head, as if to stimulate his intellect, but while he set his yellow tow-like hair on end, he examined André inquisitively. "And if I did know these men, and could tell their names," he said at last, "what would you give me?"

"Ten sous."

The young scamp puffed out his cheeks, and gave them a resounding slap, as a superlative expression of contempt and irony. "Look out for your suspenders!" he exclaimed, with an air of supremacy. "Ten sous! Upon my word! Shall I lend 'em to you?"

André smiled blandly. "Did you think I meant to offer you twenty thousand francs?" he asked.

To his infinite surprise Toto burst out laughing. "I've won!" he cried. "I bet with myself that you weren't a fool, and I've won, as I said. I owe myself a new hat."

"And why do you think I'm not a fool?"

"Because a fool would have offered me five francs to begin with, and when I asked for more, he'd have advanced to ten—as many francs, as you did sous."

The painter smiled.

"But you were not to be caught," continued Toto. He paused and frowned, for he was in great perplexity. He knew these names, of course, but should he give them? He instinctively scented an enemy. Well intentioned persons do not usually address themselves to chestnut vendors with such questions. To speak was, in all probability, to do some harm either to Mascarot or Beaumarchef, or perhaps, to that sweet and gentle Tantalé.

This last thought settled the point. "Keep your ten sous," said Toto; "I'll tell you what you want to know for nothing. I've taken a fancy to you! The tall fellow was Mascarot, and the other, the stout one, his friend Dr. Hortebize; as to the third—wait a minute till I think—"

"Oh, I know him, his name's Verminet."

"Yes, that's it!"

André was so delighted with Chupin that he drew a five-franc piece from his pocket and tossed it on to the cover of the furnace. "Here! take this for your pains," he said.

With an apish grimace Toto caught up the coin. "Thanks, my prince!" he said, and he was no doubt about to indulge in one of his usual witticisms, when he happened to glance down the street, and at once his expression changed. He became very serious, almost anxious, and fixed his eyes on the young painter with a most singular expression.

"What's the matter?" asked André, much surprised.

"Nothing," answered Toto—"oh, nothing at all! Only as you seem to be a nice sort of fellow, and not a bit proud, I should advise you to look out."

"Look out? And for what?"

"I mean—be careful—I don't know just what I do mean. It's only an idea that's come into my head—an idea that some one wants to blackmail you. But that's enough—I don't mean to say another word."

André only concealed his astonishment with infinite difficulty. He realised that the young scamp knew a great many things, the knowledge of which would be wonderfully useful to himself; but he also perceived that Toto did not mean to tell them, at least at present, and that it would be folly to try and elicit another word from him. Besides, the hour fixed for meeting M. de Breulh was now approaching. Accordingly, as an empty cab passed by André hailed it, and bade the Jehu drive him to the Round-point of the Champs Elysées.

If he did not give the name of the café where he was to meet his friend, it was because, in obedience to Toto's counsel, he had resolved to be careful—yes, extremely careful. He remembered the two odd whistles he had heard, which had made Mascaret start, and had apparently broken off the conference which the agent, Verminet, and Hortebize were having together. He recollected also, that it was after a glance down the street that Toto-Chupin had suddenly become serious, and had given him that strange, mysterious warning.

"Sounds!" he cried, suddenly enlightened by the recollection of a story he had been told not long before, "I'm being followed! That's it evidently." André was too perturbed for the time being to draw any conclusions from this discovery. Besides, the more essential point was to put the person who was following him off the scent.

He lowered the glass in front of the cab, and pulled the driver by the sleeve to attract his attention. Then, when the man turned and leaned his head towards him, he exclaimed: "Listen to me attentively, and don't change your pace. First, I wish to pay you your five francs in advance."

"But—"

"Listen. Drive as quickly as possible to the Rue de Matignon; when you get there turn round, and, as you turn, check your horses for one half minute. Then go on like the wind. When you are once in the Champs Elysées, you can go where you choose, for I shan't be inside."

The driver gave a little chuckle. "Ah, ah!" he said, "I understand; you are followed, and you want to give somebody the slip?"

"Something like that, I confess."

"Then listen to me. Look out when you jump, for I shall turn short, and don't take the side next the foot-walk—the roadway's less dangerous."

The driver was not only intelligent, but skilful as well, for on reaching the Rue de Matignon, he so managed matters that André was able to spring out without hurting himself, and had time to turn into a dark

alley before anyone else entered the street. "Like this," thought he, "I shall be able to ascertain who it is that follows me."

But all in vain did he listen and watch, entrenched behind a door for fully five minutes, which seemed endless; neither foot-spy nor vehicle appeared—there was nothing to justify his precautions in the smallest degree. "Have I been frightening myself for nothing?" he thought. "No, such coincidences cannot be accidental."

However, when a quarter of an hour had elapsed, André decided to abandon his post and join M. de Breulh. "For I am sure he must be waiting!" said he.

And he was right; for as he approached the little café in the Champs Elysées chosen as their meeting place, he perceived M. de Breulh's brougham waiting close by, and the baron himself walking up and down smoking a cigar. On catching sight of André, M. de Breulh advanced to meet him, and exclaimed: "I have been waiting for you for fully twenty minutes."

André began to excuse himself, but his friend stopped him. "Never mind," he said; "I know, of course, that you must have had an excellent reason for your delay. Only to tell you the honest truth I had become a little anxious."

"Anxious? And why?"

"Don't you remember what I said the other evening? How I recommended you to be careful. Henri de Croisenois is a villain of the deepest dye."

André did not speak, and his friend put his arm familiarly through his. "Let us walk," he said, "it will be better than shutting ourselves up in the café. Yes, I believe Croisenois to be capable of anything and everything. Ah! you guessed him aright the first time. He constantly talks of the large fortune left by his brother George, which he will one day come into possession of; but it's really only a bait for his creditors. He has long since devoured this fortune by anticipation. A man driven to extremities is not to be trifled with you know."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of him—"

"But I am, for your sake, friend André! I am somewhat relieved, however, by the idea that he doesn't know you."

The young painter shook his head. "Not only does he know me," he answered, "but I am inclined to believe that he suspects my designs."

"Impossible!" exclaimed M. de Breulh.

"Nevertheless, this very day, I've been followed about. I have no actual proof of this, but still I'm certain of it." Thereupon, without waiting for a reply, André briefly recounted everything that had befallen him.

"Yes, you are right," said M. de Breulh in a serious voice. "You are on the track of the scoundrels who mean to blackmail the Count and Countess de Mussidan; but they evidently know it and have taken their precautions. Yes, you have been followed, no doubt of it, and, in future, at each step you take, you will be watched by spies. Why, at this very moment, no doubt, we are being observed."

He looked round as he spoke, but it was already dusk, and he could see nothing suspicious. "Ah well," he added with a laugh, "we'll give your spies the slip for to-night, and if we dine together, they'll hardly know where." Thereupon, approaching his brougham, he gave the coachman some orders in an undertone.

"Come," said he to André, and they both took their seats in the carriage. The horses at once started off at a tremendous pace in the direction of the Avenue de l'Imperatrice. "What do you think of this expedient?" asked Monsieur de Breulh, gaily. "We shall keep up this pace for an hour, and return to town by way of the Avenue de St. Ouen and the Rue de Clichy. At the corner of the Chaussée d'Antin we'll stop, jump out, and then be free. Those who are minded to follow us to-night must have good legs."

The programme was carried out, only just as De Breulh alighted, he saw a shadowy form slip from behind the carriage and disappear among the crowd on the Boulevard. "By jove!" he cried, "I thought I was leading the spy off the trail, and I was only giving him a drive!"

And then to make certain, he went behind the carriage, and felt the springs and axles. "There can be no doubt of it," he said to André. "Feel for yourself, the iron is still warm. The scoundrel had passed his legs here, and held on there."

The young painter now realised why he had seen no one, when alighting from his cab at the corner of the Rue de Matignon. Whilst he darted into the dark alley, the spy perched behind the vehicle had gone on with it as far as the Champs Elysées. This adventure saddened the dinner, and a little after ten André excused himself and retired.

XXVI.

THE Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon had accurately described the situation at the Hôtel de Mussidan, when she said to André in Van Klopen's salon, "Misfortune and sorrow have brought the count and countess near together, and Sabine has decided that it is her duty to save the honour of the family. Sabine is sublime in her self-abnegation."

It was indeed a fact, that M. and Madame de Mussidan had realised that their hate ought to subside in presence of the common peril, and that their united efforts would be none too many to resist the scoundrels who threatened them. Unfortunately, this change had not taken place as early as it should have done. After Dr. Hortebize's threatening communication, and when she had ascertained that all her letters had really been stolen, Diane's first impulse had not been to confess everything to her husband, but rather to implore the help of Norbert, who was in reality as much compromised by this correspondence as herself. However, her first letter to the Duke de Champdoce elicited no reply. She wrote a second, and, finally, a third one in which she said enough to acquaint Norbert with the persecution she was a victim of, and the peril which threatened Sabine.

This third letter was brought back to her by one of the Champdoce footmen. The duke had certainly read it, for across it he had written: "The weapons you intended to use against me are turned against yourself. God is just."

She almost lost her reason on reading these words, and, for the first time, her heart of marble knew remorse. The duke's reply seemed to her a prophecy—a voice from Heaven, telling of evil days to come—saying that the hour of chastisement was near at hand, and that she must now expiate her crimes. Poor fool! She implored God to efface the past, as if the divinity had that power! At last, she realised that all was lost, and that she must speak to her husband, if she did not wish copies of the letters stolen from her to be sent to him.

It was one evening, in a small salon adjoining Sabine's room, that the

Countess de Mussidan told her husband the peril which menaced her, and what she had been asked to do. Alas! she was compelled to speak of those fatal letters and their contents; she did so with that marvellous dexterity of women who avoid lying, and yet do not speak the truth. However, she could hardly gloss over the share she had had in the death of the old Duke de Champdoce, and the mysterious disappearance of George de Croisenois.

The count was stupefied. However skilfully she presented the facts, they were still so odious, that he could hardly believe his senses. He looked at his wife, who was still handsome, and asked himself how it was possible that such a face could hide so much perversity. He recalled his youthful days, and remembered Diane as he had first seen her at Sauvignon, where he had learned to love her. How pure and candid she had seemed, and yet she had instigated a parricide! But yet another circumstance struck M. de Mussidan. He had hitherto believed that Diane's relations with Norbert de Champdoce had been more than questionable, and that they had continued even after her marriage. And yet the countess denied it, denied it absolutely, with all her energy. And the moment was a solemn one. She was reduced to reveal the secret of her life. After the terrible confession she had made, there seemed no reason why she should not admit her guilt on this point also, if guilt there was. But on the contrary, she warmly asserted her innocence, and given all the circumstances, she was certainly worthy of belief.

The count believed her; but he remembered with a pang that he had often doubted whether Sabine was his child, and now felt himself condemned to self-reproach for the indifference he had shown her. He did not speak, but when the countess had finished he rose and left the room, staggering like a drunken man.

Whilst talking, the count and countess had believed their daughter to be asleep, but they were mistaken. Fearing what she might say in her delirium, they had sent the faithful Modeste to rest, while they sat in the small salon, with the door of Sabine's room half open, so that they could hear the slightest movement she made, and, if need be, instantly hurry to her side. Yes, they had been guilty of this imprudence; and Sabine had heard the significant words—ruin, dishonour, infamy, despair.

At first she did not understand. Were not these words part of her delirious fancies? She made an effort to shake off this nightmare. But soon she realised that the whispers were grim realities, and she lay in bed, shuddering with terror. Many of the words exchanged by her father and mother escaped her, but the conclusion was too clear. Her mother's crimes would be divulged and punished if she, Sabine, did not consent to marry this man, who was unknown to her—the Marquis de Croisenois.

With a shudder she resigned herself. Duty was there; she must obey its dictates. At least, her agony could not be of long duration. To tear her love for André from her heart, was equivalent to killing her. Still she must have courage enough to live until her sacrifice was consummated and her parents safe; and then, she thought, she would have a right to accept the repose and forgetfulness of the grave. But her flesh was weaker than her spirit. Her fever returned during the night, and a relapse imperilled her life again. Fortunately, her youth and good constitution gained the victory, and, when she recovered, her resolution was in no degree weakened. Her first act was to write that letter to André, which had sent the poor fellow nearly wild. Then, as she feared her father might take some desperate step in his despair, she went to him and confessed that she

knew everything. "However, I never loved Monsieur de Breulh," she said, with a wan smile, "and so, it will not be so great a sacrifice on my part."

Was the Count de Mussidan duped by this generous falsehood? Certainly not. Alone, he would have braved the consequences of the murder of Montlouis; but could he suffer the divulging of his wife's sins, of the trap set for poor George de Croisenois and the midnight duel he had fought with the Duke de Champdoce?

Time was going on, however, and the scoundrels who had threatened the Mussidans gave no signs of life. Dr. Hortebize didn't show himself. What did this silence mean? Sometimes the countess ventured to hope. "Have they forgotten us?" she asked herself.

No, they were not forgotten. Honourable B. Mascaret never for one moment lost sight of any of the pieces on the vast chessboard he had selected for his last game, and it was with admirable precision, and always at the right moment, that he made a move. Everything had been arranged for the success of the Champdoce matter. All precautions were taken to avoid detection in the substitution of Paul for the duke's real son, and Mascaret had now time to turn his attention to the marriage of M. de Croisenois and Sabine. First of all, the count and countess's consent must be wrung from them, and then the marquiss must be compelled to start that famous company, intended to mask the blackmailing practices of B. Mascaret and his associates.

Our old friend, Father Tantaine, was commissioned to interview the Count de Mussidan, and obtain a decisive promise from him concerning Sabine's marriage. Any one else but the old clerk would, no doubt, have considered it indispensable to make some little improvement in his dress—to clean his boots, possibly, and brush the accumulated dust from his coat. But Tantaine disclaimed cleanliness, which he indeed called nonsense, declaring that the coat did not make the man. He had once been heard to say that he never quitted an article of clothing; he waited till the garment dropped from him in shreds, and, judging from his appearance, this was perhaps true. He clung to his rags as to his personality, saying that if he changed them he should not be the same man, and should fail to recognise himself in new clothes. So this is why the servants at the Hôtel de Mussidan, on seeing this dirty, shabby old man enter the vestibule, and ask to see the count or countess, replied with a jocular sneer that their master and mistress had gone out several hours ago.

However, the jest in no way disconcerted old Tantaine. Drawing one of Mascaret's address cards from his pocket, he implored these "good gentlemen," to take it up-stairs, saying that as soon as their master saw it, he would send for him to come up. The name of the honourable employment agent had magic influence among menials, and yet the footmen still hesitated, when Florestan entered the hall and consented to take the card to the count.

The Mussidans were at lunch, and when the count read Mascaret's name, he turned deadly pale, and barely had strength to stammer, "Show the gentleman into the library, and tell him I will join him soon."

Florestan left the room, and the count passed the card to his wife, saying, "You see!"

Madame de Mussidan did not look at it. "I can guess," she answered.

"Ah, yes!" said the count, "settling day has arrived. This name on this strip of card is the signification of our sentence." He rose to his feet with such a violent movement of rage that half the things on the table were overturned. "And to think I can do nothing against the scoundrels,"

he exclaimed, "nothing! It is enough to drive one mad!" His emotion was too much for him, and sinking on to a chair again, he covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

At sight of his despair the countess rose, and kneeling beside him, took hold of one of his hands and kissed it tenderly. "Pardon, Octave," she murmured, "forgive me. I am a wretched woman. God is unjust. I alone committed these crimes, and alone ought to be punished."

M. de Mussidan repelled her gently. He suffered so much, that the idea never occurred to him of reproaching this woman, his wife, who had made of his life one long agony, and who alone had caused this supreme catastrophe. "And Sabine," he resumed, "must she, a Mussidan, marry one of these ignoble scoundrels! That cannot be. It would be abominable cowardice, a more odious crime than all the others to sacrifice our daughter in order to save ourselves from infamy!"

Sabine was the only one of the three who retained a semblance of calmness, and yet her sufferings were even more terrible than her parents', and besides, she was innocent; but then she possessed that heroism which is the outgrowth of duty, and her countenance was firm and composed.

"Ah! dear father!" she said, with a gaiety that was heart-breaking under the circumstances, "why despair? Who can say that M. de Croisenois won't prove a good husband?"

The count turned to Sabine and gave her a look of the tenderest affection and gratitude. "Dear child!" he murmured—"dear Sabine!"

Her example, in some measure, restored his self-possession, and he rose again. "Let us resign ourselves in appearance, at all events," he said. "Time alone can bring us succour. Let us wait. Rescue may come before we reach the church door." Then going to the table he poured himself out a large glass of water, swallowed it at one draught, and left the room, muttering, "Come, I must be brave!"

XXVII.

GENIAL Father Tantine had guessed that some such scene would take place between Mascarot's luckless victims, and was by no means surprised at being asked to wait. Florestan had conducted him to the superb library where B. Mascarot had been received, and to kill time he took as it were an inventory of its contents. He inspected the fine old carved furniture, felt the heavy hangings, examined the costly bindings of the books, and admired the magnificent bronzes on the consoles.

"Ha! ha!" he muttered, as he tried the springs of the arm-chairs, "it is very comfortable here, and when everything is arranged, I'm not sure I shouldn't like such a nest for myself. I'm quite sure that Flavia—"

He stopped short, hearing a foot-fall on the stairs; the next moment the door opened, and the count appeared, calm and dignified, but very pale.

Tantine bowed to the very ground, pressing his shabby hat against his breast. "Your most humble servant—" he began.

But the count had paused abruptly on the threshold. "Excuse me," he said, "was it you who sent me a card soliciting an interview?"

"I had that honour," answered Tantine humbly.

"But you are not the person whose name I read on this card?"

"True, I am not M. Mascarot; but I used that respectable name, Monsieur le Comte, because I knew that my own would convey no informa-

tion to you. My name is Tantaine, Adrien Tantaine, a lawyer's clerk by profession."

It was with the greatest surprise that M. de Mussidan looked at the shabby individual before him. He realised well enough that Tantaine's simple expression and amiable smile were only affected, and that it would be folly to trust to them.

"However," continued Tantaine, "I have come on the same business, sir. It must be finished as soon as possible."

The count shut the door and looked it. This filthy looking old man compelled him to feel the ignominy of his position even still more sensibly.

"I understand," he said, "perfectly; but why have you come, and not the other—I mean the one whom I saw before?"

"He meant to come, but at the last minute he declared he wouldn't."

"Ah!"

"Yes—he was afraid. Mascarot, you see, has a great deal to lose; while I—" He stopped, and holding out the tails of his coat, turned round, so as to fully display his tattered sordid garments. "What I have on my back is all I have to lose," he added, with mock joviality.

"Then, I can treat with you?" asked the count.

"Certainly—and in fact all the more easily as I'm not an intermediary. I am the owner of the documents."

"What, is it you who—"

Tantaine bowed with an air of modest virtue. "Yes, it is I, Monsieur le Comte, who hold the leaves torn from M. de Clinchan's journal; and—why not confess it?—the correspondence of Madame de Mussidan as well. If, originally, I divided the operation, it was because I didn't think it prudent to put all my eggs in one basket. But now that you, sir, and madame are on good terms, we can, I think—"

"Enough!" answered the count, unable to conceal his disgust. "Sit down!"

Father Tantaine does not care a straw whether folks despise him or not, but he never forgives them for showing their feelings in his presence. Thus the result of the count's curt, imperious, disdainful manner, was that all the old fellow's seeming humility vanished at once. "I will be brief," he said, sharply. "Have you any intention of filing any complaint, or making any charge against us?"

"I have already said I should do nothing of the kind."

"We can transact our business, then?"

"Yes—if—"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "There are no 'ifs' in the matter!" he answered. "We dictate the conditions, which you can accept or reject as you choose."

He spoke so impudently that the count's face flushed, and he felt tempted to pitch the scoundrel out of the window. However, he had determined to keep his temper, and accordingly replied, "At all events, state your conditions."

Tantaine produced a greasy portfolio, and drew a paper from it. "These are our terms," he said, slowly. "The Count de Mussidan promises the hand of Mademoiselle Sabine, his daughter, to the Marquis de Croisenois; he gives six hundred thousand francs dowry, and agrees that the marriage shall be solemnised as early as possible. To-morrow the Marquis de Croisenois will be officially presented at the Hôtel de Mussidan, and will be well received. Four days later he will be invited to dinner. In a fort-

night hence M. de Mussidan will give a grand fête for the signing of the marriage contract. The leaves of M. de Clinchan's diary, and the correspondence of Madame de Mussidan, will be handed to M. de Mussidan, immediately after the marriage has been solemnised."

The count sat with compressed lips and clinched hands, listening to these atrocious conditions. "Very well," he said, coldly; "but who can tell me that you will keep your engagements, and that the papers will be restored to me after all?"

Tantaine gave him a glance of commiseration. "Your own good sense!" he answered. "What more could we hope from you when we have your daughter and your fortune?"

This was logical enough. Assuredly he would be left quiet when nothing more could be extorted from him. However, the count did not speak at first. For some minutes he walked up and down the library, glancing askance at the old clerk, and employing all his penetration in trying to discover some flaw, some weak point in the armour of his impudent, cynical adversary. "Well," he said at last, in a deliberate tone, like a man who has made up his mind: "I renounce struggling. You hold me; I must admit myself conquered. Exorbitant as your conditions are, I accept them."

"That's the way to talk!" said Tantaine, cheerfully.

"Only let us have a frank explanation without reticence. It seems to me that all artifice of language is unnecessary."

"Quite so."

"Then," rejoined the count, in whose eyes there sparkled a gleam of hope, "why do you talk to me of giving my daughter to M. de Croisenois? It is perfectly unnecessary. What you want is simply the six hundred thousand francs, is it not? Well, take them, and leave Sabine to me. I offer you her entire dowry—"

He checked himself, and waited for the result. He believed he had won the battle, but he was mistaken.

"It wouldn't be the same thing," answered Tantaine. "We should not attain our object in this way."

"I can do more even. Grant me another month, and in that time I shall be able to increase the sum to a million."

But Tantaine was not moved by the magnitude of this offer. "You have forgotten what I told you, Monsieur le Comte," said he. "Our conditions are final, irrevocable." He rose to his feet, and added, "I think, it would be best to end this interview, which might become irritating. You have agreed to accept the conditions; M. de Croisenois will be welcomed to-morrow—"

The count replied with a gesture of assent, but he dared not trust himself to speak.

"Then," continued Tantaine, "I can now retire. As you, sir, keep your engagements, so will we keep ours."

His hand was on the door, when the count stopped him. "One word more," said M. de Mussidan. "I can answer for myself and my wife, but as to my daughter—"

Tantaine's face changed. "I don't understand," he interrupted, speaking in a tone that showed he understood only too well. "I don't know—"

"It may be that my daughter will reject M. de Croisenois."

"Why should she? The marquis is good-looking, witty, and amiable."

"Nevertheless, she may reject him all the same."

"But surely Mademoiselle de Mussidan is too well born and bred to question her parents' decisions."

The count knew he was surrounded by spies, but he had no notion that his persecutors were acquainted with Sabine's admirable devotion. Hence he rejoined, "However, it is as well to foresee all contingencies. My daughter has always had a firm will. She was expecting to marry M. de Breulh-Faverlay, and perhaps—"

"If mademoiselle resists," interrupted the old clerk, peremptorily, "you will, if you please, let me see her for a few minutes. After that I am inclined to believe you will have no further difficulty."

"What would you presume to say to my daughter?"

"I should tell her—well—I should tell her that if she loves any one it is certainly not this M. de Breulh!" As he finished speaking, worthy Tantaine tried to bolt, fearful of the consequences his words might have, but the count, with a kick, closed the door which the old fellow had already partially opened.

"You will not leave this room," said the count, sternly, "without explaining that insulting remark. What do you mean?"

Tantaine seemed to be reflecting. His impatience had carried him farther than he meant to have gone, and he was rather at a loss for an answer. "Good heavens!" he replied at last, as he adjusted his spectacles, "I had no intention of offending you. I merely—" He hesitated, and finally, in a tone of the most delicate sarcasm, which was strange in a man of his apparent condition, he resumed: "I am aware that a noble heiress may do many a thing without being in the slightest degree compromised—many a thing which would hopelessly ruin the reputation of a girl of a different social grade. So no doubt M. de Breulh-Faverlay knew that the young lady he expected to marry was in the habit of passing her afternoons in the room of a young man—"

"Scoundrel!" roared the count. "Wretch, you lie!"

M. de Mussidan's gesture was at the same time so threatening, that Tantaine started back and pulled out the revolver which never left him, and which he had already produced on the occasion of his memorable visit to Perpignan. "Gently, count, if you please," said he. "Insults and blows never pay. I am simply better informed than yourself, that's all. I, myself, have often had the honour of seeing your daughter enter No—, Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, ask the concierge for M. André, the painter, and then start up the staircase like a hare."

The count was fairly choking. "Proofs!" he gasped. "Proofs!"

As they talked, the old clerk had manœuvred so successfully that the great library table now separated him from M. de Mussidan. Entrenched behind this improvised rampart he felt comparatively secure. "Proofs!" he answered; "do you think I carry them in my pocket? I couldn't furnish you with any of the correspondence of these young people under a week, and that's too long to wait. However, you can satisfy yourself very easily. To-morrow, before eight o'clock, go to the address I have just given, and climb the stairs to M. André's studio. There, behind a green baize curtain you will find Mademoiselle Sabine's portrait—and a good portrait it is, too. I presume you will admit that this could not have been painted without a sitter."

"Leave this room at once!" cried the count, who felt as if he were going mad.

Tantaine did not wait for the injunction to be repeated. He hurried to

the door, and when he was quite outside, popped his head in and cheerfully added, "Don't forget the address, Monsieur le Comte—André, artist, Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, No.—, and go early, before eight o'clock."

At this supreme insult, the count bounded forward, but he was too late. Tantaine pulled the door to, and darted down the staircase. "It was better than I expected," he muttered; "but, after all, I have yet to see the man who is not subdued by a fortnight's agony of suspense!" When he reached the vestibule his face had regained its usual expression, and it was with the greatest respect that he bowed to the footmen, and left the house.

"Eh! oh!" he said to himself, as he walked down the Rue de Matignon, "it seems to me I didn't arrange that so badly. The count will certainly verify my information about André. They will be brought together, and what will be the result? Was I not rather too prompt?—But no, on the contrary, it was a happy inspiration of mine. André knows himself watched, and of course I shall discover nothing more through him; whilst on the other side, M. de Mussidan, now certain that his daughter has had a lover, and what a lover too! a low born ornamental sculptor, will almost thankfully accept the Marquis de Croisenois as his son-in-law."

In saying this, worthy Tantaine felt convinced that Sabine had been André's mistress. He was quite unable to imagine the possibility of such a noble honest love as that which bound the young artist and Mademoiselle de Mussidan together. "What will be the result of the count's visit to the studio?" he asked himself. "The old nobleman's frightfully hot-tempered. Suppose they quarrelled, we might have a duel then, and who knows?—that cursed André might be killed. Well in that case, good riddance to bad rubbish, that's all I say."

XXVIII.

The old clerk had by this time reached the Champs Elysées, and he looked anxiously around him, and then made the tour of the summer circus building. He was seeking for Toto-Chupin with whom he had made an appointment, and as usual on these occasions, the young scamp was not to be found. Tantaine not only felt uneasy but out of temper also, but at last near one of those stalls where imitation lotteries for worthless gewgaws and pieces of crockery are organized, he saw Toto conversing earnestly with its owner. Chupin was no longer radiantly attired as at the "Grand Turk" but wore a dirty patched blouse, and a greasy cap—"Eh, Toto!" called worthy Tantaine—"Toto-Chupin!"

The lad heard him, plainly enough, for he looked round, but did not move. The conversation he was engaged in was evidently of great interest. However, Tantaine shouted again, and more imperiously than before, and Toto reluctantly left his companion and went towards the old clerk. "What an idea!" he grumbled. "As soon as you come, I must leave everything else. Do you feel ill, that you set up such a squeal? If you do, I'll go and get a physician."

"I'm in a great hurry, Toto."

"I daresay. So's the postman when he's late. I'm busy too."

"With that person you just left?"

"Yes, to be sure: 'that person,' as you call him, is wiser than I am. How much do you make each day, Father Tantaine? Well, that fellow

there with that little stall pockets thirty or forty francs every night, and he has literally nothing to do for it either. It must be nice to see people make such fools of themselves. I should like that business, and I think I shall start on it soon. Patience!"

Patience! Father Tantine realised that he had never so much needed it as at this precise moment. "I thought," he said, quietly, "that you were going into business with the two young men you were drinking beer with at the 'Grand Turk.'"

At this suggestion Toto howled with rage. "Business with them!" he cried. "I won't have anything more to do with the rascals!"

"Have they done you any harm, my poor Toto?"

"Yes, utterly ruined me at cards—won all my coin, and even my new clothes, that's why I'm in this old blouse. They were in force, the beggars, and made me strip. If you like to lend me a hundred sous, I shall just have five francs in my pocket. Fortunately, I saw Mascarot yesterday, and he gave me leave to sell the furnace. He's a good fellow, is Mascarot."

Tantine pouted disdainfully. "Good fellow!" he answered. "He's good and friendly enough, no doubt, as long as no one asks a favour of him."

It was so strange to hear the old clerk say a word against Mascarot that Toto was astounded. "That isn't the way you used to talk," said he.

"Ah, I didn't know Mascarot then. But since he lets me half starve while he rolls in gold, I say to myself, 'That'll do; I've had quite enough of you.' And, in fact, Toto, as you are a bright boy, I don't mind telling you that I'm only waiting for an opportunity to leave Mascarot and set up in business on my own account."

"Work for oneself, indeed," said Toto in a tone which betrayed bitter deception. "That is easier said than done; I know that right enough."

"You've tried, then?"

"To do something alone? Yes, I have, but I came to grief. Besides you know all about it as well as I do myself. Don't tell me you didn't listen that evening when you were looking for Caroline at the 'Turk.' Well, never mind, I can tell you all the same. One day then, I saw a lady looking frightened to death get out of a cab. I followed her at once. My plan was already made, and I knew just what I meant to do. I was well-dressed at the time, so I rang at the door, and I felt so certain I was going to make something out of her, that I wouldn't have taken eighty francs down for the hundred I expected to have. Well, then, I rang. A servant opened the door, and in I went. What luck I had! Why a great big fellow pummelled away at me, and finally kicked me down stairs." So saying, Toto lifted his cap and showed a couple of scars, which reddened his manly brow, "That's the bloke's mark," he added, grimly.

Whilst talking, Tantine and Toto had walked slowly up the Champs Elysées, and they had now just reached the house which was being built by M. Gandelu—the house where André worked.

Tantine took a seat on a bench just across the road. "Let's sit down a moment," he said; "I'm horribly tired."

And when Toto had installed himself at his side, he added: "Your story, my boy, only proves that you are lacking in experience. Now I've plenty of that. With Mascarot, it was really I who was at the head of most things. If I were to start on my own account, I should have a carriage this time next year; only one thing deters me, and that's my age, for unfortunately I'm growing old. At this very moment I have a superb

affair on hand with half the coin paid in advance. Only I must give it up, for to bring it to a successful issue I need some one who's young and quick."

Chupin looked up with eager eyes. "Wouldn't I do?" he asked. The old clerk shook his head. "You are too young," he said—"just as I'm too old. The heart, at your age, speaks too loudly. You would recoil just at the critical moment. And then you have your conscience."

"So I have!" cried Toto, "but it's a conscience much like yours, Papa Tantine; it has a deal of elasticity about it, and can be rolled up and tucked away when one takes the omnibus."

"Well! well! perhaps we can come to terms."

The old clerk produced a checked rag, which did duty as a handkerchief, and wiped his spectacles without removing them. "Listen to me, Chupin," he resumed; "listen to a mere supposition. You hate your two quondam friends--the fellows who were stronger than you, and who fleeced you of your money and clothes. Well, suppose you knew they ran about like squirrels all day long in the scaffolding of that big house opposite, what should you do?"

Toto scratched his head. "If your supposition were truth," he answered at last, "those chaps might as well say their prayers; for I'd slip into the house at night-time and just saw the planks nearly apart, so when one of my brigands the next morning stepped forward--whew! You understand, Father Tantine?"

"Not bad!" said the old man paternally, "not at all bad, upon my word, for a lad of eighteen."

Toto-Chupin swelled with pride. "And I'd manage it all so well," he added, "that no one would ever suspect me. I know all about the building trade. Why I worked for a mason myself once on a time."

"The more I listen to you, Toto," said the old clerk seriously, "the more I'm convinced you are precisely the partner I need. I'm sure we could make heaps of money together."

"Oh, I'm sure of that."

"The more so, as you know all about the building trade. Well, just let me tell you that among my acquaintances there's a very wealthy old gentleman who has a mortal enemy--a young man who ran off with a woman he adored."

"The old fellow must have been awfully wild."

"He wasn't pleased, certainly. Now it happens, Toto, that this young man spends ten hours out of the twenty-four on those very scaffolds opposite. The old gentleman, who's a clever fellow, had much the same idea as you, but he's too stout and too old to try the game himself, and to cut a long story short, he'd give four thousand francs to the persons who put his idea into execution. If we went into partnership, that would be halves for each of us. Two thousand francs for a little sawing!--what do you think of that, Toto?"

Despite the elasticity of Chupin's conscience, this significant suggestion made him turn pale, and he shuddered. Trying, however, to master his feelings, he exclaimed, "The thing might p'raps be done."

His agitation was too evident to escape Tantine, but the latter pretended not to notice it.

"First of all, Chupin," he said, "I must explain to you how the old gentleman's plan differed from yours. If any plank were sawed as you suggest, why we should run the risk of some other fellow breaking his neck, and our man escaping scot free."

"That's true," said Toto, who scratched his head and added, "how ever, anyone who hit on a better way would be a smart fellow."

"I've hit on one, Toto."

"Pshaw! I'm not curious, but I should like to know it."

Tantaine smiled genially. "Listen to me," he said using his forefinger as an indicator. "You see that little wooden shanty up there among the scaffolding?"

"That's where the ornamental sculptors perch."

"Open your eyes and shut your mouth," said Tantaine severely. "That little shanty a hundred feet up in the air has a window, as you see. Now, the supports of that window ought to be sawn through, down to the floor of the shanty."

"That's easy enough; but what then?"

Tantaine shook his head compassionately. "Ah!" he said, in a tone of reproach, "I thought you more intelligent than that; I really did. Suppose my old gentleman's enemy—whose name is Pierre—was in that little box at work! All of a sudden, he hears in the avenue the voice of a woman shrieking, 'Help! Pierre, help! It's I—your Adèle!' What would Pierre do, do you think? He would rush to that window and lean out, and as the supports have been sawed through, why, he'd come a cropper on the pavement."

"It's awfully well planned," said Toto admiringly.

"Not badly, certainly; but the point is, would you undertake the job?"

Driven to the wall, Chupin hesitated. "I don't say no," he muttered "but will the old gentleman pay promptly? We might do the work, and then, p'raps, he'd leave us in the lurch."

"He will pay; and, besides, didn't I tell you that he had paid half in advance?"

Toto's eyes sparkled. The old clerk unbuttoned his coat, and mysteriously produced two bank-notes of a thousand francs each. "There!" said he.

"By jove!" exclaimed Toto covetously. "If I undertake the work are one of these for me?"

"Of course; and you'll have a second one afterwards," said Tantaine.

"All right, then, count on me." And when the old clerk had handed him the note, the young scamp, carried away by delight, positively kissed it, and then, careless what passers-by might think, executed a frantic *pas de danse*.

After these preliminaries, the rest was easily settled. It was agreed that Toto should, that very night, enter the building and set to work. Beyond sawing the supports, he would only have to stroll about in the neighbourhood and watch for the result. This last point was particularly specified by Father Tantaine, who, on his side, undertook to select the right moment, which might only occur in a few days' time, for some one to call out in such manner as to bring the young sculptor to the window. The old man thought of everything, and even explained to Toto the kind of hand-saw he had to choose, giving him the address of a maker who was unrivalled for the quality of his tools. "Above all," he added, "take care not to leave any mark that might cause suspicion. Remember that the merest atom of sawdust on the floor might disclose the whole secret. It would be wise, moreover to furnish yourself with a dark lantern. Grease your saw well, and when you have finished, conceal the marks it will leave. I should suggest doing so with a little putty, over which you might sprinkle some plaster. There'll be lots lying about."

Toto listened to the old man with astonishment; he had never supposed him so practical. He promised that he would attend to all these details, and presuming that his instructions were over, he rose to go.

But Tantaine had not finished. "By the way," he said, "just tell me the truth about Caroline Schimmel. You told Beaumarchef that she accused me of making her drunk, and that she was looking everywhere for me to avenge herself. Is that true?"

"Oh! you weren't my partner then," answered the lad with a laugh; "and I only said it to frighten you. The truth is, you made the poor woman drink so much that she's very ill, and is in an hospital now."

Tantaine looked pleased. He rose, and before turning away, asked, "Where do you lodge at present?"

"I don't know. Yesterday I slept at the Carrières d'Amerique; but now, as I've some coin, I shall be furnishing a place for myself."

"In the meantime, will you have my room for a few days?" asked Tantaine. "I've moved, but the attic belongs to me for another fortnight."

"All right. Where is it?"

"You know; in the Rue de la Huchette, at the Hôtel du Péron. I'll write a word to the landlady, Madame Loupias." As he spoke, he tore a leaf from his notebook, and wrote with a pencil a request "that a young relative of his, M. Toto-Chapin," might have his room.

Toto carefully secured this letter with the bank-note in the folds of his pocketcloth, which seemed to be both his strong-box and his archives. "And now," said he, "I'll just have a look at the building, so as to plan the job."

The old clerk watched him cross the avenue and stand on the opposite pavement, looking up at the men at work. At this very moment, M. Gandelu, the builder, came out with his son, and stopped to give some directions. For two or three minutes, Toto and Gaston stood side by side, close to each other. A strange smile flitted over Tantaine's lips as he noticed this. "Two children of Paris," he mused, "charming examples of our vaunted civilisation—both gifted with similar instincts, but one of them cultivated by vice, and the other sharpened by necessity. However, the pandy struts about on the pavement, while the gamine plays in the gutter. Why is it that Toto doesn't buy cigars at a franc a-piece, and let Gaston pick up the stumps?"

But he had no time to spend in philosophising, as the omnibus he needed was within sight. He hailed it, took his seat, and, half an hour later, entered the house in the Rue Montmartre, where he had installed Paul Solaine.

Madame Bregot, the excellent concierge, who was ready to swear that Paul had resided in her house for years, happened to be in the courtyard catching one of the tenants, who was bottling wine, when she caught sight of Tantaine. She rolled up to him with a most ingratiating smile; but still absorbed in thought, the old clerk neglected to touch his shabby hat, and merely asked, with an absent air, "How is our young man getting on?"

"Better, sir; much better. I made him some good soup yesterday, and he enjoyed it immensely. He looks like a king this morning, and the doctor has just sent a dozen of wine, which will set him all right again."

Tantaine listened as carelessly as he had spoken, and he was already half way towards the stairs when mother Bregot stopped him and mysteriously added, "A person was here last night making inquiries about I. Paul."

This information roused Tantaine from his reflections, and he eagerly, anxiously asked, "Who was it?"

"A gentleman. He asked me if I were well acquainted with M. Paul, what he did, if he had several friends, and where he lived before he came here?"

"Well, what did you answer him?"

"Oh! just what you told me to say—neither more nor less."

"What sort of a person was this gentleman?" asked Tantaine, after a brief pause.

"Well, he was a man much like other men—neither tall nor short, neither thin nor fat, well-dressed but stingy, for after questioning me for a quarter of an hour, he went off without giving me a farthing."

This description of the visitor was hardly calculated to enlighten Tantaine, and he looked disappointed. "Then you remarked nothing about him in particular?" he asked.

"Yes—his spectacles, with gold bows as fine as hair; and his watch-chain, which was as thick as my thumb."

"And is that all?"

"Yes," she said, "that's all. Oh! one thing; this gentleman must know you come here."

"Indeed! What makes you think so?"

"Because, while he was talking to me he was in an awful fidget—he never took his eyes off the door. He was as restless as Minette, my cat, when she has stolen a piece of meat while my back's been turned."

"I thank you, mother Bregot. Be prudent and watchful," said Tantaine, as he continued his way upstairs far more slowly than was his habit. He stopped every two or three steps to think. "Who can this person be?" he asked himself.

With wonderful promptitude he surveyed the whole field of probability and possibility, and still he was at a loss to answer his own query. "That man must know me," he pondered. "If he was nervous and fidgety, it must have been that he feared being surprised by me. He must be working against us. He can't have come with any good intentions." As the old clerk reflected, his anxiety developed into fright. "Thunder!" he muttered. "Are the police at my heels?" He tried to reassure himself; but only succeeded partially; for his nerves were strangely shaken. "At all events," he said, "I must make haste. After succeeding, I can certainly annihilate all proofs. I must finish the work as speedily as possible."

He had now reached the third floor, and stood at the door of Paul's apartment. He rang, and the door was instantly opened; but at the sight of the person who had answered his ring, he started back and uttered a cry of angry astonishment. It was a woman who stood before him—a young girl, the daughter of Martin-Rigal, the banker. At one glance, Tantaine, a keen observer, realised that Mademoiselle Flavia had not been with Paul merely for a few minutes; for she was without her hat and cloak, and held a piece of embroidery in her hand. "What do you wish, *Mademoiselle*?" she asked.

The old clerk tried to speak, but, strange to say, he could not utter a word. An iron hand seemed to be clutching at his throat, and he looked like a man who was about to have an apoplectic fit. Flavia gazed at him with some curiosity and considerable disgust. This shabby, sordid-looking old man repelled her. She fancied she had seen him somewhere before. In fact, there was an inexplicable air about him which puzzled her.

"I should like to speak to Monsieur Paul," said the old clerk at last, in

a voice so low and husky that it was almost unintelligible; "he expects me."

"In that case, sir, come in; but I ought to warn you that his doctor is with him just now."

As she spoke, Flavia retreated close to the wall, so that Tantine might enter without touching her dress. He passed her with a low bow, and crossed the little salon with the air of a person who knew where he was going. He did not even knock, but opened the door of the bedroom and went in.

A singular spectacle met his eyes. Paul, who looked very pale, was sitting up in bed with his shoulders bare, and Hortebize was hovering round him with an air of eager interest. On Paul's arm, from shoulder to elbow, there extended an enormous wound or burn, which must have been intensely painful. The doctor was applying to this appalling wound strips of gold-beater's skin, which had previously been moistened with a solution contained in a phial standing on a side table.

When Tantine entered, Hortebize turned, and so readily did these two men understand each other, that a gesture and a glance sufficed for them to exchange their thoughts. "Flavia here!" was what Tantine's gesture signified. "Is she mad?" "I daresay, but I can't help it," was the answer to be read in the doctor's eyes.

However, Paul also had turned, and it was with an exclamation of delight that he greeted the old clerk, who of all the people round about him pleased him the most. In fact, he thought him less evil-minded than the other associates. "Come here," he said gaily, "and see what a pitiable state the doctor and M. Mascaret have reduced me to."

It was with the attention and curiosity of a connoisseur that Tantine examined Paul's wound. "Are you sure," he asked Hortebize, "that the scar will deceive, not only the duke, who will believe just what we choose, but also his wife and friends, and even his physicians?"

"We will deceive them, one and all!" answered the doctor decidedly.

"The next point," continued Tantine, "is, how long we shall have to wait for the scar to become white and acquire an appearance of age."

"Before a month has elapsed, we can present Paul to the Duke de Champdore."

"Is that really so?"

"Understand me: the scar will not be altogether natural, but there are several other things I intend to do to it."

The dressing was now completed, and Paul's shirt was pulled up over his shoulders, and he was allowed to lie down again, and instructed to move and turn about as little as possible. "Oh! I'll keep still," he said, "as long as I have the nurse who's waiting in the next room. By the way, I'm sure she's waiting with great impatience for your departure."

Hortebize frowned, and gave his patient a furious look, as much as to say, "Hold your tongue!" but the young fellow was blind.

"How long has this nurse been with you?" asked Tantine, in a constrained voice.

"Ever since I've been in bed," answered Paul, with the most conceited air. "I wrote to say, I could not go and see her, as I was ill; and so she came here. She received my note at nine o'clock, and at ten minutes past she made her appearance."

The judicious doctor contrived to get behind Tantine, and made a despairing gesture to Paul to induce him to say no more; but all in vain.

"It seems," continued the conceited simpleton, "that M. Martin-Rigal spends his life in his private office. As soon as he is up in the morning, he shuts himself up in his private room, and is never seen again all day. So Flavia is free as air. As soon as she knows that the worthy banker is busy with his papers, she throws a shawl over her shoulders and flies to me. Upon my word, no one could be more obliging or prettier." Then with an impudent little chuckle he added, "Why, I could send M. Mascarot about his business."

"Believe me, it would be most unwise to do so," rejoined the doctor severely.

Paul perceived the gesture with which M. Hortebize underlined these words, but he mistook their meaning. "Oh I don't intend to do so," he said. "Only it would hardly do for M. Martin-Rigal to think of refusing me his daughter's hand. Flavia wouldn't hesitate between her father and me--"

Tantaine, who for some minutes had been pulling frantically at his spectacles, now stammered, "You are no doubt flattering yourself."

"And why? Flavia loves me, you know that, of course--and this is the point. Poor girl! I ought to marry her, and I will; but still, if I chose--"

"Miserable scoundrel!" cried the gentle Tantaine. "Only a fool and coward would dare speak like that of a poor girl whose only misfortune is that she loves a conceited whipper-snapper unworthy of her. Do you think I'll allow--"

His gesture was so furious, and his voice so threatening, that Paul was frightened, and drew back to the wall: but Tantaine went no further, for Hortebize had seized him by the arm and now fairly dragged him from the room.

XXIX.

PAUL was utterly at a loss to imagine why Tantaine had burst into such a rage. No doubt he had spoken improperly of Flavia, who was really entitled to his respect and tender deference. But conceited as his language had been, did it really justify such an outburst? And, besides, why was it that each time he affected that scorn of all morality which his associates gloried in, they should turn round on him, and treat him with contempt? After all, he would have understood and accepted a remonstrance from the doctor, who was Martin-Rigal's intimate friend. But what earthly connection was there between that cynical old beggar Tantaine and the rich banker?

Forgetful of the suffering which the slightest movement caused him, Paul sat up in bed and listened eagerly, with extended neck, hoping to hear something of what was going on in the next room. But there was a thick wall between the salon and bedroom, and he could hear nothing. "What are they doing?" he asked himself. "What are they plotting?"

Father Tantaine and Hortebize had rapidly crossed the salon, only pausing on the landing where the doctor tried to console his companion, who seemed utterly desperate. "Courage!" he said, in a low voice--"courage! What on earth is the good of getting into a state like this? How can you mend matters? No--it's too late. Besides, even if you could, you wouldn't, as you know very well yourself."

The old clerk had drawn out his handkerchief to dry—not his glasses, but his eyes. “Ah!” he said, “now I understand only too well what Monsieur de Mussidan must have felt when I proved to him that his daughter had a lover. I have been cruel, hard, and pitiless, and I am punished—yes, bitterly punished.”

“You mustn’t attach too much importance, old friend, to this nonsense. Paul is a mere lad.”

“Paul is a miserable, cowardly hound,” replied Tantaine in a fierce whisper. “He does not love Flavia, but she adores him. Oh, what he says is true, too true—I feel it. Between her father and himself she would not hesitate a moment. Poor girl, what a future lies before her!” He checked himself abruptly, and appealing to all his energy, succeeded in regaining some semblance of his usual composure. “However,” said he, “she must not remain here, and as I cannot speak to her myself, try, doctor, and make her listen to reason.”

Hortebize shrugged his shoulders. “I fear my eloquence will be of no avail,” he answered. “And in that case, no doubt, you will be unable to restrain yourself. However, remember that one word might reveal to her the secret of our lives.”

“Go at once. I swear to you that whatever happens, I will remain calm.”

The doctor returned to the room as he spoke, while Tantaine sat down on the stairs outside with his head in his hands.

Mademoiselle Flavia was just returning to Paul when the doctor appeared. “Back again!” she said, pettishly; “I thought you far away.”

“I wanted to say a few words to you,” answered Hortebize, “and serious ones, too. You need not draw down those pretty eyebrows—I see you understand me. Yes, you are right. I came to tell you that this is not the place for Mademoiselle Martin-Rigal.”

“I know that,” she answered, with such cool calmness that the smiling doctor was evidently disconcerted.

“It seems to me—” he began again.

“What? that I ought not to be here? However, I place duty above propriety. Paul is very ill—he has no one with him; so who ought to take care of him, except the woman he is soon to marry? Has not my father given his consent?”

Hortebize was reflecting for some good argument. “Come,” he said at last, “listen to the voice of my experience. Men are so constituted that they never forgive a woman for compromising herself, even for themselves. Do you know what would be said of you twenty-four hours after your marriage, if it were known you had been here? Why, people would say that Paul had been your lover, had, in fact, seriously compromised you, and that your father had only for that very reason consented to your marriage. Believe me, don’t lend yourself to slander which might trouble all your married life.”

Flavia was as red as a poppy. The doctor’s words had hit home, and she hesitated. “But can Paul be left all alone?” she objected. “What will he think?”

“Paul’s nearly cured, and, come, if you are reasonable, I promise he shall go and see you to-morrow.”

This last argument put an end to Flavia’s resistance. “Very well then,” she said, “I obey you—and don’t ever tell me again that I’m obstinate. Just let me say one word to Paul, and then I’ll go!”

The doctor retired, well pleased with his victory, and not in the least suspecting that he owed it to a suspicion awakened in Flavia's mind.

"We've won," he said to Tantaine on the stairs. "Now let's make haste. She'll follow us at once."

When Tantaine was in the street again he seemed to have recovered his wonted self-possession. "Ay, we've won," he said, "for to-day; but how about to-morrow? This marriage must be hastened. It can take place now without danger to any one. In forty-eight hours the only obstacle separating this youth from the Champdouce millions will have disappeared."

Worthy Dr. Hortebize turned pale at this information, although it was not unexpected. "What!" he stammered; "André—"

"André's very ill, doctor! I have arranged the scheme I spoke to you about, and the most difficult part of the undertaking will be accomplished this very night by our young friend, Toto-Chupin."

"By that boy? Why, only the other day you declared you suspected him, and thought of getting rid of him for good."

"That's still my intention, but I mean to kill two birds with one stone. When it's discovered after André's fall, as will certainly be the case, that the window supports had been sawed apart, the perpetrator of the deed will be searched for. My precautions are taken. Master Toto will be found at the Hôtel du Pérou; it will be proved that he purchased a saw, and changed a thousand-franc note at the time."

Dr. Hortebize looked greatly alarmed, "Are you mad?" he cried. "Why, Toto will denounce you."

"I daresay he will, but by that time poor Tantaine will be dead and buried. Then will come the interment of B. Mascarot. Beaumarchef, the only one who has faithfully served us, will be in America. The play will have finished, and we shall be able to snap our fingers at the police!" He talked like this, the genial Tantaine, so as to stimulate the doctor's confidence, and yet at that very moment, mindful of another Bregot's visitor, he was asking himself whether he hadn't a detective at his heels.

"Decidedly," said Hortebize, "you were made for success. But for heaven's sake make haste! All this incessant suspense and these fluctuations of hope and despair will make me seriously ill."

The two honourable associates talked thus at the corner of the Rue Joquelet, partially concealed from observation by a van. They were waiting, anxious to ascertain if Flavia's promise had been sincere. Yes, she had been truthful, for in less than ten minutes they saw her pass.

"Now," said the old clerk, "I can go in peace. Good-bye, doctor, till to-morrow." And without waiting for a reply, he walked rapidly away in the direction of the Rue Montorgueil. "Ah," he muttered to himself, "how can I find out about that chap with the gold spectacles. I dare not confide anything to Hortebize! However, when a man's three persons at the same time he surely ought to be able to save one individuality!"

He was interrupted by Beaumarchef who breathlessly barred his passage, just as he turned under the *porte cochère* leading to B. Mascarot's agency. "I was looking for you," cried the ex-sub-officer. "M. de Croisenois is in the office, abusing me like a pick-pocket, because M. Mascarot isn't there."

"Go up stairs," replied Tantaine, "and occupy this penniless marquis. Make him be patient. The master will be there before long." Then as soon as Beaumarchef had disappeared, he darted down the Passage de la Reine de Hongrie, turned into the Rue Montmartre, and entered Martin-

l'igal's house. "Dash it," he grumbled, "Beaumarchef may think what he likes. In another fortnight he'll be far away."

He was wrong to suspect Beaumarchef, who having been told to go upstairs, had at once obeyed. He had been told moreover to occupy the marquis, and he was doing his best, though his best did not have much effect on M. de Croisenois. "Great business people, to be sure," the latter grumbled, "to have forgotten the engagements they made themselves."

He suddenly stopped, for the door of the inner sanctuary had opened and B. Mascarot appeared in person. "I am not late, M. le Marquis," he said. "Punctuality does not consist in arriving before the time, but in keeping an engagement exactly at the appointed hour. Pray consult your watch and walk in."

The marquis, so impertinent with Beaumarchef, became the veriest school-boy when he was seated opposite Mascarot, and it was with a most anxious eye that he followed the movements of the agent, who seemed to be looking for something among the papers on his desk. Having found what he wanted, he turned to M. de Croisenois. "I desired to see you, sir," he said, "in reference to the company you are to start, according to our agreement."

"Yes, I know; we must discuss it, fully understand it, and feel our way."

The agent whistled disdainfully. "Do you think," he asked, "that I am the sort of person to stand and cool my heels while waiting for you to feel your way? If you do, you had better undeceive yourself as quickly as possible. When I undertake anything it is promptly done. You have been amusing yourself while Catenac and I have been working for you; and everything is ready."

"Ready! What do you mean?"

"I mean that the offices are taken in the Rue Vivienne, that the company's statutes are deposited with a notary, and that the members of your board of directors are chosen. The printer came here yesterday with the prospectuses and circulars. You will find that you can begin to-morrow."

"But --"

"Read for yourself," answered Mascarot, extending a sheet of paper. "Read, and perhaps you will be convinced."

Croisenois took the paper in a bewildered sort of way, and began to read it aloud: --

THE COUPER MINES OF TIFILA (ALGERIA).

MARQUIS DE CROISENOIS & Co.

Capital - Four Millions of Francs.

This company does not appeal to rash speculators who are willing to run great risks for the sake of high dividends. Our shareholders must not expect more than six, or at the most, seven per cent. profit on their investments, &c., &c.

"Well," asked Mascarot, "what do you think of that as a beginning?"

The marquis did not at first reply, he was finishing his perusal to himself. "It all seems very real and very true," he muttered, trying to conceal his agitation, which was intense, for although driven to the wall he was still anxious to shirk the task imposed upon him. But what objection could he raise? "The prospectus," he said at last, "is so tempting that I fear we shall have other subscribers than those we contemplate. What should we do in that case?"

"We should refuse to take them, that's all. Ah! Catenac would settle them soon enough. Read your bye-laws. Article 20 says expressly that the Board of Directors reserve to themselves the right of accepting or refusing the subscriptions they please."

"Very good," said M. de Croisenois, "but what should we do if one of the persons whom you mean to compel to take a certain number of shares happened to dispose of them to someone else? Might not this other party interfere with us?"

"Article 21 has provided for that trick. Listen to it: 'A transfer is only valid when it has been certified to and authorized by the Board of Directors, and inscribed on the register of transfers.'"

"And how will this comedy end?"

"Naturally enough. You will announce, one fine morning, that two-thirds of the capital being absorbed, you are compelled to go into liquidation, according to Article 17. Six months later you will let it be understood that the net results of the liquidation are—nothing! You wash your hands of the whole affair, and it's all over!"

Croisenois felt that he was beaten on all points, but he tried one more argument. "It seems to me," said he, "that it's rather hazardous to undertake this enterprise just now. May it not interfere with my marriage? May not the Count de Mussidan be unwilling to give me his daughter, under the circumstances, and risk her dowry? Now, on the contrary, when once I'm married—"

The agent gave a little sniff of disdain. "You mean, I suppose," he interrupted, "that when you are once married and have received Mademoiselle Sabine's dowry, you will say good-bye to us! Not so, young man. If that's your idea, put it out of your head, for it's sheer nonsense. I shall keep my hand on, then as now."

It was clear that further resistance was quite useless, so Croisenois murmured. "Well, begin your advertising then."

"That's what I call speaking!" exclaimed Mascaret. "The first announcements shall appear in the morning papers, and to-morrow afternoon you will be officially introduced to the Mussidans. Put on a bold front and try and please Mademoiselle Sabine."

When M. Martin-Rigal emerged from his private office that evening, his daughter showed herself far more affectionate than usual. "How I love you, dear father!" she said, as she kissed him. "How good you are!" Unfortunately, he was too pre-occupied to ask Flavia the reason of this sudden display of tenderness.

XXX.

THE danger which threatened André was immense. However, he knew that he was being watched, and considered, not unnaturally, that it was with the object of putting him out of the way at the first favourable moment. Now, were he to perish Sabine would be lost, and for this reason, he resigned himself to a prudence that was very far from his character. He knew that he could claim assistance from the police, but in doing so, he might risk the honour of Sabine's family.

He felt certain that with time and patience he would be able to confound the scoundrels who persecuted not merely the Mussidans, but himself as

well ; but on the other hand, great as was his patience, time was wanting. Only a few days now separated Sabine from the terrible, irreparable sacrifice she was called upon to make, and would they suffice for the mighty task he had undertaken ?

Having risen at daybreak, André was seated in his studio before his work table, and with his head in his hands he pondered—recapitulated the various events that had occurred, and tried to connect them together, like a child tries to fit the pieces of a puzzle-map one into the other. He was searching for the connecting link, which to his idea must exist between all these people he had come across—Verminet, Van Klopon, Mascaret, Hortebize and Martin-Rigal. Whilst analysing the various incidents of the last few days, he came at last to thinking of young Gaston Gaudeln.

"Is it not strange," he said to himself, "that this unfortunate fellow should be victimised by the same scoundrels who are persecuting us—by Verminet and Van Klopon ? It is really very strange."

He stopped with a short start. A new idea had occurred to him. On superficial examination, it was no doubt monstrous, improbable, fantastic, and yet after all might it not be founded on fact ? A presentiment seemed to tell him that young Gaudeln's ruin was connected with his own, that they were both the victims of the same intrigue, and that this affair of the forged promissory notes was but part and parcel of some general scheme. André would have sworn that such was the case, and yet he had of course no means of explaining to himself how it happened that he and Gaston were thus mixed up together. But stay, who had denounced young Gaudeln to his father ? Catenac. Who had advised the incarceration of Zoraïse ? Catenac again. Now this Catenac, who was Gaudeln's lawyer, was also Verminet's and de Croisenois' man of business. Had he not obeyed their instructions ? All this was certainly vague and entangled. How could all these strange presumptions be linked together ? It seemed almost impossible to accomplish such a task, and yet André determined to pursue his investigations on this basis.

He had just taken a pencil with the view of jotting down the main features of some general scheme of investigation, when suddenly he heard a knock at the door. He glanced at his clock : it was not yet nine. Who could this matutinal visitor be, André wondered ; nevertheless, he rose to his feet and called out, "Come in."

The door was thrown open, and the young artist staggered back, for who should stand before him but Sabine's father. He had only caught a glimpse of the Count de Mussidan on two previous occasions, but he would have recognised him under any circumstances.

The count also was ill at ease. He had passed a sleepless night, and it was only after a severe mental struggle that he had decided upon taking this step. However, he had had time to prepare himself, whereas André was taken unawares.

"You will excuse me, sir," began M. de Mussidan, "for intruding upon you at so unseasonable an hour, but I thought I should be more likely to meet you."

André bowed. A thousand suppositions, each more unlikely than the other, flashed through his mind. Why had the count come there ? Was it as a friend or as an enemy ? Who had given him his address ?

"I am an amateur," continued Sabine's father, "and one of my friends, who has an excellent judgment has spoken to me, most warmly, of your talent. This will explain to you the liberty I take, curiosity has induced me, I

have felt desirous of seeing—" He did not finish his phrase ; but stopped short, and then added, "I am the Marquis de Bivron."

Thus M. de Mussidan gave a false name ; he did not imagine André knew him ; he wished to retain his *incognito*. This circumstance in some measure enlightened the young painter as to what course he had better pursue.

"I am extremely flattered by your visit," answered André. "Unfortunately, I have nothing completed just now. I have only a few studies and sketches, but if you like to see them—"

The count at once assented. He felt greatly embarrassed, and could hardly help flushing when his eyes met the young artist's frank, honest gaze. He was, moreover, still further disturbed by seeing in a corner of the studio the veiled picture which Tantaine had spoken to him about. In response to André's suggestion, he began to inspect the studies hanging on the walls, at the same time making heroic efforts to keep calm, and hide the awful agony he suffered. Ay, the cynical old tatterdenialion who had called upon him had spoken the truth. That green baize curtain hid his daughter's portrait. This man, then, was Sabine's lover. She came here—she spent hours here. Alas ! whose fault was it ? Had her mother ever showed her any affection ? Had he, her father, ever treated her with aught but callous frigidity ? Could she be blamed ? She had listened to her heart. She had accepted from a lover the affection her parents had never bestowed on her.

The count was forced to admit that Sabine's choice was not an unworthy one. At first sight he had been struck with the young artist's manliness, and the energetic, intelligent expression of his face.

"Ah ! You come to me under a borrowed name," André was thinking. "Very good, I will respect your *incognito*, but I will take advantage of it in one way, for I will tell you the truth, which, perhaps, I should never have dared to reveal under different circumstances."

Great as was his preoccupation, he noticed his visitor's eyes turned again and again towards the veiled picture. "Some one must have spoken to the count about that portrait," he thought. "He has come here on account of it. Who can have mentioned it to him ? Our enemies ? In that case Sabine must have been slandered."

Meanwhile, M. de Mussidan had gone round the room, and had time to gather his energy together. He now approached André again. "Accept my congratulations, sir," he said. "My friend's praise was not misplaced. I regret, however, that you have no finished work to show me—for you have nothing, I believe ?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Not even that picture, the frame of which extends beyond that green curtain ?"

Although he had expected this question, André flushed scarlet. "Excuse me, sir," he answered, "that picture is certainly completed, but I never show it to any one."

The count could now no longer doubt the correctness of Tantaine's information. "I understand," said he, "it is no doubt a woman's portrait."

"You are right, sir ; it is a woman's portrait."

The situation was so strange ; they were both of them equally perturbed, and averted their faces in embarrassment. But the count had sworn he would go on to the bitter end.

"I see," he said, with a forced laugh, "you are in love. After all, all great painters have immortalised the beauty of their mistresses."

André's eyes flashed. "Stop, sir—you misunderstand me. This is the portrait of the purest and most innocent of girls. I love her, and it would be as impossible for me to cease loving her, as to stop by an effort of will the circulation of the blood in my veins. But I respect her as much as I love her. She, my mistress! Why, I should loathe myself forever if I had ever breathed to her one word that her own mother could not have heard!"

Never in his life had Monsieur de Mussidan experienced so delicious a sensation of relief. "You will excuse me," he said; "but a portrait in a studio suggests that there must have been a model."

"And there was one, sir. She came here, unknown to her family, risking her honour, her reputation, and her life, and thus giving me the strongest possible proof of her affection." He shook his head sadly and resumed: "I was wrong, very wrong, to accept this devotion; and yet, not only did I accept it, but I went on my knees to beg for it. How else was I ever to hear her voice or see her? We love each other, but, alas! such a great social difference, so many prejudices keep us apart! She is an heiress, belonging, unfortunately for our love, to a very great and noble, a very proud and wealthy family; whilst I—" He paused, as if hoping for some remark, a word of encouragement or blame. None came, however, and somewhat emphatically André resumed: "Do you know what I am? A poor foundling, dropped in the basket at an hospital door by some poor girl who had been betrayed. One morning, when I was twelve years old, I ran away from the hospital at Vendôme with twenty francs in my pocket, and found my way to Paris. Since then, I have earned my bread by daily toil. You see only the brilliant side of my life. Here, I am an artist; elsewhere, I am a common workman. Look at my hands; they tell the truth. Still, I hope to succeed; one day, perhaps, I shall. But I have had to study and at the same time earn my livelihood."

If M. de Mussidan still kept silent, it was because he could not help really admiring André, and he wished to conceal his true sentiments.

"She knows all that," resumed the young artist; "she knows it, and yet she loves me. She has confidence in me. When I despaired, she bade me persevere. Here, in this very room, she swore she would never be another man's wife. I have faith in her promise. Not a month ago, one of the most brilliant men in Paris solicited her hand. She went to him and told him our story, and he generously withdrew, and to-day he is my best friend." He paused, for he was stifling. He was pleading for his own happiness in life, and his anxiety was overwhelming. At last, however, he managed to speak again. "And now, sir," he asked, "do you wish to see the picture of this young girl?"

"Yes," answered the count; "I should be grateful to you for that mark of confidence."

André went to the picture; but as he touched the curtain his hand dropped, and he hastily turned round again. "No!" he exclaimed, "no! I cannot continue this comedy. It is unworthy of me!"

Monsieur de Mussidan turned pale. These words might have a terrible signification. "What do you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean that I knew you, sir—that I knew I was speaking to the Count de Mussidan, and not to the Marquis de Bivron. I will not uncover this picture without warning you, without telling you—"

With a kindly gesture the count interrupted him. "I know," he said, "that I am about to see Sabine's portrait. Uncover it; sir, if you please."

The young painter obeyed, and for a moment M. de Mussidan stood in silent ecstasy before this really remarkable painting. "Yes, it is she," he said; "her very smile, the light in her eyes! It is beautiful!" He spoke a few more words, but in so low a tone that they were lost for André, and then slowly turning to the young painter's arm-chair, he sat down and seemed lost in reflection.

Misfortune is a true master. A few weeks before, M. de Mussidan would have smiled and shrugged his shoulders at the idea of giving his daughter in marriage to this insignificant painter. He was then thinking exclusively of M. de Brenli-Faverlay. But now, he would have received as a boon from heaven the liberty to choose André for Sabine. Must she really marry that hateful Marquis de Croisenois? At this thought the count started.

André had shown so much assurance that he could hardly be acquainted with the real situation. But on questioning the young artist, M. de Mussidan was undeceived. Conscious of having won the day, André told the count exactly what he knew, spoke of M. de Brenli's generous assistance and the part that Madame de Bois d'Ardon had consented to play, revealed his plans and investigations, his conjectures and his hopes. Such was his vehemence and energy, so brightly did his eyes sparkle with conviction of success, that the count's spirits began to revive. At last they studied the situation together at great length, and agreed that prudence and dissimulation were requisite above ought else; that it would be better not to confide their hopes even to Sabine, and that the Marquis de Croisenois must be received with apparent good grace. Moreover, they must abstain from seeing each other; they must hide their understanding from everyone.

Eleven o'clock was striking when M. de Mussidan rose with the view of retiring. After again contemplating his daughter's portrait for some minutes, he turned to the young painter, and grasping his hand, exclaimed, "Monsieur André, you have my word for it, if we ever free ourselves from these scoundrels, Sabine shall be your wife."

XXXI.

WHEN M. de Mussidan had gone, André sunk on to the divan. His head and heart were burning. Yes! Sabine was promised to him, but on conditions he won her; and to win her he must unmask and confound Croisenois and his associates. However, with the promise of such a prize, the young painter felt strong enough to dare them all. "To work!" he cried, springing to his feet again, "to work!"

He stopped short, for on the stairs outside he could hear some woman laughing noisily, whilst a man seemed to be scolding in a sharp, high-pitched key. André had no time to ask what this meant, for his door was well-nigh burst open, and a whirlwind of velvet, silk, and lace burst into his studio. To his astonishment, he recognised that this whirlwind was the beautiful Zora-Rose de Chantemille. In her wake came young Gaston de Gandela, who was the first to speak. "Ay, here we are, in the flesh," he shouted. "Did you expect us?"

"Not at all."

"Ah, indeed! Well, it was a surprise of the governor's. Upon my word, I intend to make his declining years happy, as Leontine said in the

play. This morning he came into my room, and he said to me : ' I took all the necessary steps yesterday to release a person you are very fond of. (Go and find her.' Now what do you think of that? So I rushed off, found Zora, and here we are ! "

André gave him only imperfect attention, for he was watching Zora, who was looking about the studio. She was on the point of pouncing on Sabine's portrait, when the young painter hastily intervened. " Excuse me," said he, " I have to place a picture to dry." And then, as the portrait stood on a movable easel, he rolled it into his bedroom.

" Now," resumed Gaston, " I want to celebrate Zora's deliverance. Will you come and lunch with us ? "

" Thank you ; no. Indeed I can't, for I have to work."

" I daresay---and work is a very good thing ; but just now you must go and dress."

" Indeed, it's quite impossible ; I can't go out."

Gaston reflected for a moment, and then exclaimed, " I have it ; you won't come to lunch. Well, then, lunch shall come to you. An excellent idea. It's the reverse of Mahomet and the mountain. Well, I'll just go down and order the needful." So saying he bounded out of the room.

André rushed after him ; but it was in vain that he shouted down the stairs. Gaston hurried on, and the young artist returned to his studio considerably out of temper. Rose noticed how annoyed he looked. " That's the way Gaudelin goes on," said she, shrugging her shoulders ; " and he thinks himself very witty. Pshaw ! "

Her tone indicated such utter contempt for her lover that the painter looked at her in astonishment.

" Why are you so amazed ? " she asked. " It's easy to see that you don't know him. And all his friends are just like him. If you listen to them for an hour you are absolutely sickened. Merely to think of the evenings I've spent in their society makes me yawn." And she did yawn, as if inexpressibly wearied. " If he only loved me ! " she sighed.

" Loved you ! Why, he adores you ! "

Rose made a little gesture that would have excited Toto-Chupin's envy and admiration. " Do you really think so ? " she asked. " Come, do you know what he loves in me ? When people look at me as they pass and say, ' Heavens ! what *chic* ! ' my idiot is proud and happy. But if I wore a cotton wrapper, he wouldn't as much as look at me ; and yet, after all, I'm not so very ugly."

The fact is, that Rose had improved, despite her incarceration. Her impudent beauty had never been so brilliant. She was glowing with youth, and life, and passion. " My name didn't please him," she continued. " His dainty lips couldn't condescend to utter the name of Rose, and so he called me Zora---a dog's name, by the way---and I have to bear it. He has money, no doubt ; but I don't care much for money after all. My little Paul had no money, and yet I loved him well enough. I have forgotten how to laugh, I think, and yet I was merry once."

" But why did you leave Paul ? "

" Why ? Well, just tell me why there's velvet at forty-five francs the yard ? I thought I should like to know how women feel when they put on an India shawl, and so, one fine day, I took to flight ; but, after all, who knows ?---perhaps Paul would have left me. There was a fellow doing his best to separate us---a neighbour of ours at the Hôtel du Pérou---an old monkey named Tautaine, a *huissier's* clerk."

At this name André fairly gasped. An old fellow—Tantaine—a *huissier's* clerk! It must be the same. However, he tried to master his emotion. "Nonsense!" he said, with affected carelessness; "what interest could he take in separating you?"

"I don't know," answered Rose, becoming all at once very serious; "but I am sure he had one. Men don't give bank-notes to people for nothing, and I saw him give Paul one for five hundred francs. More than that, too, he promised him he should make a great fortune with the help of a friend of his named Mascarot."

This time André did not start. He was prepared for some such revelation. However, he felt alarmed at the development the intrigue was taking. All these manœuvres which he discovered one by one must have a common object. He recalled the visit that Paul had paid him on the pretext of returning the twenty francs he owed, and he remembered that Paul had boasted he could make a thousand francs a month, though he had not said how.

"Paul has forgotten me, I fancy," continued Rose. "I met him once at Van Klopea's, and he did not say a word to me. It is true he was with that Mascarot. However, I'll find him out, and no doubt he'll forgive me."

Rose's statements all pointed to one conclusion. Paul was protected by the members of this mysterious association; hence he must be useful to them. Rose, on the contrary, was persecuted by them, so she was in their way. "And indeed," thought André, "if Catenac had Rose shut up, it looks as if he were afraid of her. It seems as if her mere presence deranged their combinations."

But he had not time to finish his deductions, for Gaston's falsetto voice was now again heard on the stairs. Presently he appeared. "Room for the feast!" he cried. "Let the fête begin."

In his rear came a couple of waiters laden with baskets of provisions. At any other time André would have been enraged at this intrusion, and have dreaded the prospect of a lunch likely to last two hours at the least, and put his studio in a state of confusion. Now, however, hoping to learn something that would facilitate his investigations, he was inclined to bless Gaston for the inspiration, and it was with the best grace in the world that, assisted by Rose, he cleared a large table, on which the cloth was laid.

In the meanwhile, Gaston perorated. "Ah!" said he, "I must tell you a story—a good joke. Henri de Croisenois, one of my intimate friends, has just organised a company."

André nearly dropped a decanter he held. "Who told you so?" he asked.

"Who told me so? A great yellow poster told me so!—'Tifila Mines—capital, four million of francs.' I call that the joke of the season. Poor dear marquis, and he has hardly a penny to buy a loaf of bread with."

The young painter looked so utterly bewildered that Gaston laughed aloud. "You look just as I did," he said, "when I stood with open mouth in front of that poster. Croisenois chairman of a company! If I had read in a paper that you were elected pope, I really shouldn't have been more astonished. Tifila Mines, indeed! shares 500 francs each! 'Tou my word, that's coming it rather strong."

Meanwhile, the lunch had been laid on the table, the waiters had retired, and Gaston bade his guests sit down. But, alas! gaily as the banquet began, it was fated to end tempestuously. Young Gandelu, whose head was none of the steadiest, drank most inordinately, and before long the fumes

of the wine mingled with the fumes of vanity in his shallow brain. The small amount of good sense he possessed disappeared entirely, and he began to overwhelm Zora with bitter reproaches—not being able to understand, as he told her, how a serious man like himself, destined to play a great role in society, could have been led away by such a person as she was. Gaston possessed a goodly store of invectives, but Rose was even stronger than himself in this respect. Being attacked, she defended herself so effectually that finally the young fellow lost his temper, or what remained of it, and went off declaring that never, no never, would he see Zora again. She might keep all he had ever given her—furniture and jewels—said he, and he should consider himself well rid of her at the price.

His departure delighted André, who, now that he was alone with Zora, hoped to obtain some further information from her, and notably an exact account of Paul, whom he now numbered among his adversaries. The hope was vain, for the young woman herself was so exasperated that she would not listen to a word. She hastily put on her hat and mantle and dashed off, declaring she meant that very moment to go in search of Paul, who in her conviction would speedily punish Gaston for his insults. All this transpired so rapidly that the young painter felt as if he had been visited by a tornado.

As quiet and calm fell on his studio again, he began to realise that Providence had manifestly interposed in his favour, by sending this interesting pair to furnish him with new facts, which were of the greatest importance. Indeed what Rose had said, incomplete as it was, threw light on a portion of the intrigue which had hitherto been enveloped in darkness. Paul's intimacy with Tantine explained the pains Catenac had taken to have Rose shut up, as well as the forged signatures wrung from the weak-minded Gaston.

But, on the other hand, what was the meaning of this business enterprise started by the Marquis de Croisenois, at the very time when he was applying for Sabine's hand? André decided to turn his attention first to this detail; and, at once, ran down stairs and hastened to the corner of the street, where Gaston had told him he had seen the poster. There it was, dazzling and conspicuous, and sufficiently fascinating to attract even the most timid capitalists. Nothing was lacking, not even a charming view of *diffla* (Algeria), showing a number of workmen loading barrows with ropper ore; whilst, just above, the name of De Croisenois stood out in letters six inches high.

André had surveyed this masterpiece for five minutes, or more, when all at once he had a gleam of common sense and prudence. "Idiot!" he said to himself, "what am I doing here? Who can tell how many knaves may be reading my countenance, and deciphering all my plans in my eyes." As this thought crossed his mind, he turned swiftly round, but no one suspicious was in sight. "Never mind," muttered André "those fellows must lose my scent. I must disappear." Success depended on this point, and when he returned to his room he sat for an hour revolving every possible plan in his mind. At last, he fancied he had discovered a feasible one. Under his windows there extended a large garden, or rather ~~the~~ ground belonging to a school, which was entered by the Rue de Laval. A wall, not more than seven feet in height, separated the courtyard of André's house from this garden. Why couldn't he escape unperceived in this direction. "I might," he thought, "disguise myself in such a way as not to be recognised, and to-morrow in the small hours of the morning, climb

the wall and get out by way of the Rue de Laval, while the spies are watching my door in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. It isn't necessary for me to sleep here. No! I can ask Vignol to accommodate me, and besides he'll assist me in every possible way."

This Vignol was the friend who, in André's absence, was superintending the work going on at the Gandelu mansion. "In this way," continued the young artist, "I can escape completely from Croisenois and his banditti. I can watch their game without their suspecting me. Of course, I must cease to see all those who are now assisting me: De Bréuilly, Gandelu and M. de Mussidan. But that can't be helped. Besides, I have the post-office and the telegraph in cases of emergency. Indeed, I will write, and tell them my intentions."

It was dark before he had finished his letters. He then went and dined at the nearest restaurant; and, having posted his letters, returned to his rooms to arrange his disguise.

His costume was ready, for he found it among his old clothes, an old blue blouse, a rusty pair of trousers, shabby shoes, and an equally shabby cap, were all he required. However, it was important he should change his face. He began by clipping off his beard, and then cut his hair in such a way as to leave on either side two long locks which he anointed with cosmetic to his temples. This done, he looked for some water colours, and set to work with a camel's hair brush, seeking to modify the complexion and expression of his countenance. The task was more difficult than he had supposed, and it was only after long and patient toil that he was satisfied with the result. He then dressed himself, wrapped an old handkerchief round his throat, and stuck his cap on one side, with the visor pulled down over the right eye. Thus equipped, he gave himself a glance in the looking-glass, and thought himself absolutely hideous. However, like a conscientious artist, he was about to correct certain faults he detected in his make-up, when he suddenly heard a knock at his door.

It was nine o'clock. He was expecting no one. The waiters from the restaurant had taken their baskets and crockery away; and the person outside could only be his concierge, whom he did not choose should see him in his disguise, for he had but limited confidence in the discretion of worthy Madame Poileveu. "Who's there?" he asked.

"It is I," answered a plaintive voice—"Gaston!"

Was there any reason to distrust this young fellow? André decided not, and accordingly he opened his door.

"Has Monsieur André gone out?" asked young Gandelu faintly; "I thought it was he who spoke."

Then he was deceived by the disguise! This was a triumph for André, but showed him at the same time that his voice must be changed as well as his face. "What!" said he, "don't you recognise me?"

Gaston started with surprise, and made some confused remark. It was plain that some terrible catastrophe had befallen him. His morning excursions alone could not have reduced him to that state.

"Tell me," said André kindly, "what has gone wrong with you?"

"Why, I've come to say good-bye to you. I'm going to blow out my brains at once—"

"Are you mad?"

Gaston struck his forehead in a dreary way. "Not in the least," he said, "it is simply this—those notes have turned up. To-night just as I was leaving the dining-room—having dined with the governor—the butler

whispered to me that an old man was waiting for me outside. I went out and found a dirty old beggar, with his coat collar turned up about his ears."

"Old Tantine!" cried André.

"Ah! Is that his name? I didn't know it myself. However, he said to me in the sweetest voice that the holder of my notes had decided to lay them before the authorities at twelve o'clock to-morrow, but that a means of escape was open for me."

"And that was to go to Italy with Rose."

Gaston's surprise was so great that he started to his feet. "Who told you so?" he cried.

"Nobody; I guessed it. It was part of their plan, when you were first induced to forge M. Martin-Rigal's signature. And what did you say?"

"That the proposition was utterly absurd, and that I wouldn't move a foot. Besides, I see their plan. As soon as I'm out of the way, they'll go to my father and blackmail him. But it shan't be. Why it'll kill him to learn that his son is a forger. However, I've bought a revolver, and in an hour from now, it'll all be over."

André was not listening. What should be done? he asked himself. To advise Gaston to depart and take Rose with him was to deprive himself of a considerable chance of success. But on the other hand, to let the young fellow kill himself was not to be thought of; ordinary humanity forbade that, and besides André was under great obligations to his father.

"Listen to me," he said finally. "I have an idea, Gaston, which I will disclose to you when we are out of the house. Only for certain reasons, which would take too long to tell you now, it's necessary I should get into the street without leaving this house by the door. I can manage it, if you will only help me. Go away now, and at midnight—precisely—ring at the door of No. 29 Rue de Laval. The concierge will pull the string, go in, and ask some question of her. In the meanwhile leave the street door ajar. I shall be in the garden of the house, and while you are with the concierge, I will get out into the street and wait for you."

Gaston complied with these instructions, the plan succeeded, and at ten minutes past midnight he and André were walking along the outer Boulevard. The young painter was full of hope. He was convinced he had put the spies who were watching him off the scent, and besides he had conceived the idea of executing a powerful diversion, thanks to Gaston, whilst personally he continued tracking Croisenois and the rest of the band.

XXXII.

MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS DE CROISENOIS resided in a superb new house on the Boulevard Malesherbes, near the church of Saint Augustin. In a modest suite of rooms, rented for four thousand francs a year, he had accumulated sufficient vestiges of his former opulence to impress superficial observers. To guard against the annoyances of creditors, his apartment was taken in the name of his valet. His brougham and horse belonged, in the same way, to his coachman. For, low in funds as he was, the marquis still drove about in his own natty "pill-box." He had no other servants besides his coachman and valet—the former doing most of the rough work indoors, whilst the latter knew enough of cooking to prepare a bachelor's breakfast.

Mascarot had only seen the marquis's valet on one occasion, and the man

had so singularly impressed him that, in his distrust, he tried to find out who he was and where he came from. Croisenois had told the agent that he had only engaged the fellow on the recommendation of an English friend, Sir Richard Wakesfield. Morel, as the valet called himself, certainly seemed to have lived in England, for he spoke English passably well. He was, moreover, expert in all his duties, and so dignified in manners and appearance, that ignorant folks fairly believed his master to be a perfect grandee.

André knew but little of all this; he had merely obtained some trifling information from M. de Breulh, when he asked the latter for Croisenois' address. However, on the morning of his escape from his studio, he came, still in his disguise, to a wine-shop close to the marquis's residence. Providing Croisenois' servants patronised this establishment, as seemed probable, there being none other in the immediate vicinity, he would no doubt be able to overhear their talk and pick up some useful information. The young artist's confidence had increased since the previous evening; for not only had he saved Gaston, but the young fellow's escapade seemed likely to yield an advantageous result.

This is what had occurred. After infinite trouble, he had induced Gaston to return to his father's house; and on reaching the Chaussée d'Antin, at two o'clock in the morning, he had made bold enough to have old Gandelu wake up. Then, after explaining the reason of his own disguise, he told the contractor how his son had been victimised and induced to commit forgery, and how, but for his own intervention, the young fellow would have committed suicide. He naturally insisted on Gaston's repentance the good sentiments he expressed, his separation from Rose, and his promise to become serious.

The old man was much moved and shed tears. This would no doubt prove a decisive lesson for his son, and really modify his conduct for the better. "Go and fetch him," said the poor contractor; "tell him to come to me, and say that we two will save him."

André had not far to go, for Gaston was waiting in the next room in a agony of suspense. He was weeping, weeping with repentant sorrow, he was wailing his own foolishness and the misery he must have caused his good indulgent father. "Come in, Gaston," said André.

But with unusual energy, the young fellow exclaimed, "Never call me by that name again. It is as false as the coronet on my cards. Call me Pierre Gandelu. My father is only too kind to allow me to bear his name."

Thus began the reconciliation was bound to prove complete. The worth contractor had not felt so happy for many years. The next thing was to decide what course to take to rescue the lad from the consequences of his folly. "I do not believe," said old Gandelu, "that these wretches will dare to carry their threat into execution, and apply to the legal authorities. At all events, my son cannot remain exposed to this intimidation. I myself will lay a charge against the whole band. I will call on the public prosecutor before noon, and we will see what happens to this Mutual Loan Society, which lends money to minors and extorts forged signatures in return! It will be best, however, for my son to go to Belgium in the morning; but he won't stop there long, as you'll see."

André remained in the old gentleman's house throughout the night, as it was in Gaston's room that he made himself up again in the morning. The future looked rosy indeed, as he walked lightly up the Boulevard Malesherbes. Thanks to the contractor's intervention, the police would now deal with Vermine's malpractices. The inquiry would, moreover

probably result in the detection of the other members of the band, and this enormous result would be gained without any mention being made of M. de Missidan, the countess, or Sabine. For his own part, André was determined to cling to Croisenois like a shadow. The establishment where he installed himself was wonderfully adapted for his purpose. From the table where he sat he could see all the windows of De Croisenois' apartment, as well as the door of the house, which no one could leave or enter unperceived by him. Moreover, as there was no other wine-shop in the vicinity, André felt certain that the marquis's servants would come there, in which case he could talk with them, offer them something to drink, creep into their confidence, and obtain important information. He sat down at a table near the window and ordered breakfast, keeping his eyes and ears on the alert. The shop was full of customers, nearly all of them servants, and André wondered whether any of these were in the employ of M. de Croisenois. He was racking his brain for some excuse for questioning the landlord, when the door opened and two more servants entered, one of them attired in a coachman's livery, and the other wearing the discreet black of a *collet de chambre*. "Ah, ha!" exclaimed an old man with a placid countenance, who was struggling with a tough beefsteak at the table next to André's. "Ah, ha! here come Messrs. Croisenois."

Servants, as is well known, often call each other by their masters' names, and thus André obtained the information he desired without having to make any suspicious inquiries. "If these men," he thought, "only had the happy thought of sitting near this old fellow, who knows them, I could hear every word they say."

This they did, at the same time begging the landlord to serve them as speedily as possible, as they had not a moment to spare.

"What are you in such a hurry about?" asked the old man near whom they seated themselves.

"Why," answered the younger of the new-comers—M. de Croisenois' coachman, "I have to drive my master to his office; for he has an office now. He's the chairman of a mining company—copper mines—a splendid thing it is, too. Why, 'Geese plucked here' ought to be written up over the door! If you have any savings, Monsieur Benoit, as you ought to have, this is a good chance to invest them."

Benoit shook his head gravely. "Who can tell?" said he. "All that looks good isn't good, and what seems bad isn't bad." Benoit was evidently a prudent man, who had seen much of life, and was not disposed to commit himself lightly. "But come," he continued, "if your marquis is going out, Monsieur Morel will be free, and we can have a game of piquet with father."

"No, sir," answered the valet.

"Are you engaged as well, then?"

"Yes, sir; I'm just going to put on some white gloves and carry a heap of flowers to the marquis's future wife; for he's going to be married. It's official. A splendid dowry, so I hear; as for the young lady, she's a bit naughty; but I wouldn't mind taking her myself for three months, just on trial."

This fellow in the preposterously high, stiff collar was actually speaking of Sabine in this disgraceful style, and André had to appeal to his powers of self-restraint not to spring at his throat and strangle him.

"Ah, well!" said the coachman, with his mouth full, "ah, well! I don't

mind betting that the marquis won't invest his wife's dowry in his new business."

This remark elicited no rejoinder, and the two ceased talking of M. de Croisenois to speak of their own affairs, which naturally had no interest for André. He waited in vain. They settled their score and went away without so much as mentioning the marquis's name again; and the young artist was reduced to reflect over the difficulties a spy encounters. The other customers were looking at him most suspiciously, and the fact is, he scarcely had a pleasing aspect. Moreover, he had not yet acquired the art of observing things without appearing to do so. It was easy to see that he was there for some other reason than lunch; that he was waiting for some one or something, and was growing impatient. He had enough penetration to realise the impression he had created, and his embarrassment became all the greater.

Having finished his meal, he took some coffee, sipping it as slowly as possible, and now he called for a glass of brandy. There were only some five or six customers left, sitting at a table near the door, and playing a game of cards which seemed to amuse them immensely—that is, judging from their constant shouts of laughter. André half thought of retiring, and hurrying to the marquis's offices to wait for his arrival there; but on consideration, he decided to make quite sure that M. de Croisenois was going out, and wait till he saw him drive off in his brougham. So he still lingered in the wine shop and called for another glass of brandy.

It had just been served him, when as evil a looking individual as himself entered the establishment. The new comer was a tall, ungainly, impudent-looking fellow, with a tuft of red hair on his chin. He wore a dirty black jacket and a dilapidated cap, and was, to all appearance, as fine a specimen of a *bourgeois* bully as could anywhere be found. In a husky, drawling voice he ordered a plate of beef and a pint of common wine, and while passing in front of André to reach a vacant table, he upset the young artist's glass of brandy. This might be a mere accident, hence André made no remark; but as the new comer sat down, far from apologising, he gave the artist a most contemptuous look. He was smoking, this big fellow, and setting his cigar on a corner of the table, he relieved himself by spitting—not on the floor, but on André's trousers.

This time the insult was so flagrant, that André reflected as to its meaning. Had he not eluded his spies as he fancied he had done? Was it not possible that this individual had been purposely sent to pick a quarrel with him and give him a blow that would settle him? Prudence bade him depart at once; but he felt he could not do so until he had satisfied himself positively of the truth of his surmises. However, there seemed little doubt of their exactitude; for as the fellow cut up his beef, he tossed every bit of skin or muscle he found over on to his neighbour. Finally, he drank a draught of wine, and leaving a little at the bottom of his glass, deliberately threw it—not on to André's legs, but on to his shoulders.

This was more than the young artist could put up with. "Just observe," said he, "that some one is sitting here."

"I know that very well. Aren't you pleased?"

"No, I'm not."

"Ah, well, with me you must be pleased, or else—" And so saying the bully shook his fist but an inch or two from André's nose.

The young artist had powerful reasons for remaining calm, but nature mastered will, and rising to his feet, he lunged out, the result being that

the bully rolled under the table. The noise made the card-players turn round. They had been so absorbed in their game that they were not acquainted with the origin of the fray, and could not tell who was in the right or who in the wrong. They only saw André standing erect, with flushing eyes and lips trembling with rage, while the other fellow lay on the floor among the chairs.

"No fighting here, do you understand?" said one of the players. "Just settle your quarrel in the street."

André's adversary, however, had just struggled to his feet, and now made a rush at the young artist, who, with an adroit application of his left foot, succeeded in stopping him midway. It was altogether so skilfully done that the card players applauded. They now found the fight as exciting as their game had been. Three times did André's adversary charge, and each time the young artist cleverly repulsed him. Finally there was a great scrimmage, a table was overturned as well as a stove, and several glasses were smashed, as well as a couple of window panes. The landlord, who had momentarily absented himself, hurried to the scene on hearing this last crash. With the assistance of a waiter he parted André and his adversary, and then, noticing that the damage done represented some twenty francs, he bade the antagonists settle for it between them and then clear out. André would gladly have paid the whole of what was owing, in view of effecting a speedy escape; but his opponent flew into such a rage, and began shouting to such an extent, that at last the landlord despatched the waiter for a couple of policeman, who, strunge to say, entered the shop the very next moment, as if they had indeed been purposely waiting outside. At all events, before André had time to breathe, he found himself with his adversary in the street, between a couple of *sergents de ville*, who bade them both walk straight and keep civil tongues in their heads.

It would have been sheer folly to resist, and the young painter resigned himself to the inevitable. But on the way he could not help pondering over this strange scene. The whole affair had been so sudden and so swift, that as yet he could not see it clearly. Still it was certain that this brutal aggression had some secret motive, which he could not fathom. Meanwhile, the police agents had reached a narrow alley. They ordered their prisoners on in front, and André now realised that they were not being taken to the lock-up, but to the office of the district commissary of police. A moment later they entered a bureau where the commissary's secretary and a couple of clerks were at work.

"Well, the job's done," said the *sergents-de-ville*, with a hearty chuckle; and thereupon they withdrew, leaving André and his opponent in the office.

André opened his eyes. This was really a most extraordinary arrest. However, there was more to come, for his assailant tossed his cap aside, smoothed his hair, and shook hands most cordially with the commissary's secretary. What did it all mean?

"Allow me to congratulate you, sir, now," said the young painter's recent opponent. "You've a good stout fist, and no mistake. Fortunately I backed down under the table just in time when you lunged out, on the first occasion—otherwise you might have killed me. However, I wasn't able to escape your foot when I charged; that was really a masterly defence on your part."

The young painter listened in amazement. But at this moment a door was thrown open, and a voice could be heard calling out, "Send him in." André was thereupon pushed by his recent adversary through the doorway

into a narrow corridor, and presently found himself in a room which seemed to be the commissary's private office. On the right hand side, before a desk in front of a window, sat a man who looked between forty or fifty years old, and who wore a white choker and a pair of gold rimmed spectacles. "Please to sit down, Monsieur André," said this personage with the most exquisite politeness.

The young artist took a chair in a semi-stupefied condition and waited. Was he dreaming? Was he awake? He was uncertain. He doubted himself, his own intelligence, even the testimony of his senses.

"Before proceeding further," said the spectacled gentleman, "I must apologise for what must seem to you the very singular manner in which you have been treated. However, I really had no choice. I particularly wished to speak with you. You are closely watched, and it was essential that the folks who watch you should not imagine there was any connivance between you and me."

"I am watched!" stammered André.

"Yes, by a certain *La Candèle*; a bright fellow—in fact, I may say the brightest fellow for that sort of work in Paris. Does this astonish you?"

"Yes, for I thought—"

The spectacled gentleman smiled benevolently. "You thought," he interrupted, "that you had succeeded in eluding your spies. So I supposed this morning, when I saw you in your present disguise. Unfortunately you were bound to lose your time. The people who watch you know very well that you yourself are watching the Marquis de Chosevoise. So by stationing himself near the marquis's house, *La Candèle* made sure of meeting you again."

"Ah! Of course, I had not thought of that," stammered André, with considerable confusion.

"On the other hand," resumed the spectacled gentleman with increased urbanity of manner, "you must allow me, my dear Monsieur André, to tell you that your disguise leaves much to be desired. The first attempt of a man in a new trade is, I admit, always to be viewed with indulgence. But *La Candèle* would not be taken in. Even at this distance, I can detect your entire 'make up,' and what I see, others, of course, can see as well." So speaking, he rose and approached André. "Why on earth," he said, "have you decked your face with all these colours, which make you look like a North-American Indian in his war paint? In order to change a man's countenance, only two strokes of a crayon are necessary, red or black—here at the eyebrows, there at the nostrils, and here again at the corners of the mouth. See for yourself—"

He joined a practical demonstration to his theory; for producing a pencil case as he spoke he corrected the young artist's imperfect work. When he had finished, André glanced at himself in the looking glass over the mantel-piece, and was fairly astonished. No one would ever have recognised him. With his eyebrows which almost met, his deformed nose, and his enlarged mouth, he had a sinister, impudent look, such as he himself would never have known how to acquire.

"Now," continued the unknown gentleman, "do you realise the futility of your attempts?" *La Candèle* knew you at once. However, I wished to speak to you so I sent for *Pilot*, one of my agents, and bade him pick a quarrel with you. Two policemen then arrested you, and so here you are. No one knows that we are together. Pray, efface my touches, for they would be remarked when you go out, and would necessarily awaken suspicion."

André obeyed, and while he rubbed his face with the corner of his

handkerchief, his bewildered mind sought for some elucidation of this mystery. He was evidently in presence of some important functionary of the Préfecture of Police; but what was wanted of him? How had the police found him out? What had they discovered?

Meanwhile the spectacled personage had resumed his seat in his arm-chair, and was handling his snuff-box in a style which the most finished actor at the Comédie Française might have envied. "Now," he said, "let us have a little talk together, if you please. As you see I know you—Jean Lantier, your old master who engaged you eleven years ago when you arrived in Paris, after running away from Vendôme, tells me he'd answer for you under any circumstances, and Lantier's son-in-law, Dr. Lorilleux, asserts that he knows no character higher than yours—he declares your probity to be without a stain, your courage undoubted—"

"Really, sir—" stammered the young painter, flushing scarlet.

"Let me proceed. Monsieur Gandelu tells me he would be willing to confide his whole fortune to you; your comrades, one and all—Vignol at the head of them—have the highest respect for you. So much for the present. As to the future, two painters of the greatest renown assert that you will one day stand at the head of the French school. At this moment, your work brings you in about fifteen francs per day. Am I correct in my information?"

"Quite so," stammered the bewildered André.

The spectacled gentleman smiled. "Unfortunately," he continued, "my information ends here. The means of investigation in the hands of the police are necessarily very limited, they can only act on facts, and not on intentions. So long as volition is not accompanied by action, the police are helpless; and it must always be so until a detective finds some way of taking the top of a man's head off like the cover of a box, and looking down into it to see what's going on there. However, I heard of you only forty-eight hours ago for the first time, and I already have your biography in my pocket. I know that the day before yesterday you were walking about with young Gandelu, and driving with Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay, and that La Candèle was behind the vehicle. These are all facts, but—" He paused, and after giving André a piercing look, slowly resumed, "But no one has been able to tell me why you followed Vermine, or why you watched Mascaret's house, or why you have disguised yourself to follow the honourable Marquis de Croisenois about. It is the motive we can't get at—the facts are clear."

André moved restlessly on his chair, disturbed by his questioner's magnetic gaze, which seemed to draw the truth from him, despite the resistance of volition. "I cannot tell you, sir," he said, at last—"I really cannot. It is a secret which does not belong to me."

The spectacled gentleman smiled: "You don't choose to trust me? Very well, then, I will speak. Remember that I have told you all I knew positively; but I have also drawn my inferences and deductions, from the facts laid before me. You are watching Croisenois. Why? On account of his Mining Company? No. Then it must be because he is going to marry a rich heiress—Mademoiselle de Mussidan. Come don't blush. We haven't got to the end of it yet. Well, we'll conclude then that you wish to prevent this marriage—and why? Do you happen to love Mademoiselle de Mussidan, and does she love you in return? That is of course a reason; but it doesn't explain your disguise. So there is something more no doubt. I have heard that Mademoiselle de Mussidan was at one time to marry

Monsieur de Breulh-Faverlay. Do the Count and Countess de Mussidan prefer a ruined marquis to one of the most remarkable men of the day? That isn't possible! It is clear to me that they give their daughter to Croisenois under compulsion of some kind. What kind of compulsion? That's the point. Doesn't the marquis happen to hold some terrible secret over their heads?"

"Your theory is at fault, sir!" cried André. "You are wrong—entirely wrong."

"All right," rejoined the spectacled gentleman, shrugging his shoulders. "If you cry out with such superfluous energy that I'm wrong, it's simply because you know me to be right. I need no proofs. Yesterday Monsieur de Mussidan paid you a visit, and my agent said that his face was much brighter when he came out of the house you live in than when he went in; consequently, I infer that you promised to rid him of Croisenois, and he, in turn, agreed to give you his daughter. And this explains your present disguise. Now just tell me if I'm mistaken?"

The young painter could not lie, and therefore did not dare to speak.

"And the secret," continued the spectacled gentleman "didn't the count tell you the secret? I don't know it myself, and yet I think I could find it out if I tried. People fancy the police forgets things. 'Tis a great mistake. The police has a terrible memory. I'm acquainted with some apparently forgotten crimes which three generations of detectives have worked at. For instance, did you ever hear that your Croisenois had a brother named George a brother older than him? This George disappeared one fine evening twenty-three years ago, in a most mysterious way. What became of him? No one has ever been able to tell. However this very George was a great friend of Madame de Mussidan's. Might not that disappearance of years ago account for this marriage of now-a-days?"

André rose, quivering, to his feet. "Who are you?" he cried, "I want to know who's speaking to me."

The spectacled gentleman smiled and answered, "I am Monsieur Lecoq."

At the name of this celebrated detective, André recoiled in absolute amazement. "Monsieur Lecoq!" he stammered.

The detective's vanity was agreeably tickled by the impression his name had produced on the young artist. "And now that you know me, dear Monsieur André," he said, "may I venture to hope that you will be more reasonable."

M. de Mussidan had not confided his secret to the young painter, but he had said enough for him to realize that the detective's surmises were not far from the truth.

"If we could only understand each other, fully," continued M. Lecoq; "and indeed, upon my word, it seems to me that my frankness ought to elicit yours. I need you, and on my side I can be useful to you. Let us assist each other. Pure chance has made me acquainted with you. I discovered that you were being watched by certain people, whom I myself was watching, and I said to myself, this young man must be an important personage of the intrigue. I had you followed, and for a couple of days you have had at your heels not merely the other folks' spies but mine as well. To-day, everything considered, I have come to the conclusion that my surmises are correct. Yes, you and you alone will furnish the finish, the denouement. I am seeking for--"

"I, sir?"

"Yes you, the artist and ornamental sculptor, called André for the time being."

For the time being!—The expression seemed strange to the young painter, but he did not venture to question the detective.

"For several years," resumed M. Lecoq, "I have felt certain that an organised association for blackmailing existed in this city. Family differences, sorrows and shame, imprudences, and the like, prove absolute gold mines to a party of scoundrels who make at least a hundred thousand francs per annum."

"Ah!" muttered André, "I suspected something of this kind."

"Of course, when I was quite sure of it, I said to myself: 'I must nab these fellows.' But it was easier said than done. Blackmailing, you see, has one peculiarity: those who practise it feel well-nigh certain of impunity. Suppose you are asked for a thousand francs, and are threatened in default thereof with the revelation of some secret calculated to overwhelm you with shame or ridicule; naturally you would pay the money and keep quiet. Why, a score of times I have found out some pigeon or other who had just been plucked, but never would one of them furnish me with weapons against the scoundrels who had victimised them. It was all very well for me to say, confide in me, the police is discreet, your secret will be respected, I can promise it, swear it. No one would ever believe me. The fools doubted my word! Such being the case, I soon realised that it was impossible to reach the scoundrels through their victims. Accordingly, I decided to try and reach their victims through them. Ah! I have needed patience. For three years I have been waiting for an opportunity. During the last eighteen months one of my agents has been acting as the Marquis de Croisenois' valet. The scamps! I'm sure that at the present moment they've cost the house at least ten thousand francs!"

As André realised, "the house," was no other than the Préfecture of Police.

"Yes, ten thousand francs," repeated M. Lecoq, "to say nothing of the worry. Why, I owe a dozen white hairs to Mascarot alone! For I believed that Tantaine really existed, and Martin Rigal as well, whereas Tantaine and Rigal and Mascarot are simply one and the same person! It was a long time before I thought of a door of communication between the banker's house in the Rue Montmartre and the Employment Agency in the Rue Montorgueil. Ah! the scamp's a cunning fellow!"

Cunning indeed, but he was to find his master: such was evidently the meaning of the detective's smile. "This time," said he with increased animation, "this time they have gone too far, and I have them. The idea of establishing a company so as to net the coin of all their victims was really a very pretty one; but then I'm there and the scamps are lost. Ah! I know them all now, from their chieftain Mascarot, *alias* Rigal and *alias* Tantaine, down to Toto-Chupin, their lowest agent, and to Paul their docile instrument. We will trap the whole band. Hortebize and Verminet, Croisenois and Beaumarchef. We may, perhaps, also collar Van Klopen. As for Catenac he can't escape. Just now, he's travelling in the country near Vendôme, with the Duke de Champloce and a fellow named Perpignan. But two of my guardian angels are at the party's heels, and send me news of their progress almost hourly. My trap is well set, well baited, and we'll catch them all as you shall see. And now, Monsieur André, do you still hesitate to confide to me what you know? I swear to you, on my honour, to respect your confidence, no matter what may happen."

The young painter felt half bewildered, but still, thanks to the detective's statements, he divined that he had to contend against truly terrible adversaries—adversaries so powerful and expert, that alone, unaided, he had little prospect of success. Moreover, like everyone else who approached Lecoq, he was fascinated by him; and besides, what was the use of hiding anything?—what he concealed from the detective to day would surely be known to-morrow. Thus the wiser plan was rather to try and win his good graces. With the utmost frankness, therefore, André told everything he knew.

When he had finished, Lecoq rose to his feet. "Now," cried he, "I see clearly before me. Ah! They wish to compel Gandelu to go off with Rose, do they? Well, we'll see about that."

His eyes flashed behind his gold spectacles; he had just decided on his plan of battle. "From this moment," said he, "you may sleep in peace, Monsieur André. In another month Mademoiselle de Mussidan will be your wife. I promise it you. And when Lecoq promises, he means what he says. I answer for everything." He stopped, reflected for a moment, and then resumed more slowly. "I answer for everything except for your life. Such great interests are centred in your person that every means will be tried to get rid of you. Don't forget that for one moment. Never eat twice in succession at the same restaurant; throw away any food that has a peculiar flavour; keep away from all street crowds, hold all kinds of vehicles in suspicion; never lean out of a window unless you know that the supports are solid. In a word, fear everything and suspect everything."

André warmly thanked the detective, and was on the point of retiring, when Lecoq exclaimed, "One moment. Do you happen to have such a thing as a scar or a sign on your arm or shoulder?"

"Yes, indeed, I have the scar of a severe burn."

M. Lecoq did not take the trouble to hide his satisfaction. "Ah! ha!" said he, "I thought as much. Everything's going on capitally." And as he gently pushed the young artist out of the room, he saluted him with the same words that Mascaret had so often used to Paul: "Till we meet again, my Lord Duke of Champdore!"

XXXIII.

ANDRÉ turned hastily round, but the door had been closed behind him, and he could hear the key grating in the lock. He was now again in the outer office, where the commissary's secretary, the two clerks, and his whilom opponent in the wine shop looked at him and smiled. André was, however, too preoccupied to notice them; he mumbled a word or two, which may have been "good morning" or not, and then hurried out into the street. He was greatly perplexed by M. Lecoq's parting words. Were they a joke? But in that case what was their point? Now André was a clear-headed, practical man, he had proved it; but on the other hand he was a foundling, he had never known either father or mother, and the field of conjecture was immense. Who could tell? Perhaps he belonged to a noble family—a family that had been compelled to abandon him, but would seek for him once more. Such strange things happen at times, who can be certain of his destiny? "What a child I am," he muttered at last; "is joy troubling my brain?"

At all events, he now possessed a formidable ally, a protector, who took, indeed, even greater interest in him than he imagined. Immediately after his departure, M. Lecoq had opened his door, and summoned his agent Palot. "My lad," said he, "you saw that young man who just went out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he's a worthy fellow, with heart and energy, as honest as daylight, and as true as steel. I esteem him thoroughly, and he's my friend."

Palot's look and manner signified that he should henceforth consider André a sacred being.

"Now you must follow him," resumed M. Lecoq, "and closely too, for this isn't merely a case of watching him, but of defending him, if needs be. I'm sure that the Mascarot gang want to murder him, and it must be prevented, mind. You are my best, most faithful agent, and I trust him to you. He's warned, but he lacks experience. You will see danger where he would never dream of any. If there's any trouble, throw yourself into the breach, have every one marched to the lock up, but try not to let any one discover who and what you are. If at any emergency it is imperative you should speak to him, do so; but only as a last extremity. Whisper in his ear my servant's name 'Janouille,' and he'll understand that you come from me. Now, remember, you are to answer for him. But Mascarot's men mustn't recognise in you the fellow of this morning's quarrel. They would guess everything then. How are you dressed under that blouse?"

"Like a commissioner."

"Good. Now arrange yourself, and be very particular about your head."

Palot at once approached the looking glass, pulled a curly beard and wig from his pocket, and adjusted them with all the dexterity that habit imparts. Twenty minutes later, he approached his superior, who was waiting, and asked, "Shall I do?"

M. Lecoq scrutinised him most carefully, and finally replied: "Not bad!" The fact is, the fellow was the ideal type of a Paris commissioner, and any Auvergnat would have saluted him instantly as from his own province.

"Where shall I find this young artist now, sir?" he asked.

"Somewhere near Mascarot's den, for I advised him not to relinquish his rôle of spy without my orders. Come, make haste after him!"

Palot darted off, and overtook his "ward" half-way down the Rue Montmartre. André was sauntering slowly along, ruminating over M. Lecoq's advice always to be careful, and look out for his adversaries, when a handsome young fellow with his arm in a sling walked rapidly past him, proceeding in the same direction as himself. André felt certain that this young fellow was Paul Violaine, and as he did not fear being recognised, he overtook him in his turn and had a good look at him. It was, indeed, Rose's former lover. But why had he his arm in a sling? This was the first question that occurred to André, and by a phenomenon which is not uncommon when the mind is concentrated on one particular point, he had an intuition of the truth. "At least," he thought, "I can discover where he goes."

Accordingly, he followed him, and saw him enter the house where M. Martin-Rigal resided. Two women were talking near the door, and André heard one of them say, "That's the young man who is engaged to Mademoiselle Flavia, the banker's daughter."

So Paul was to marry the daughter of the leader of the band? Was M. Lecoq acquainted with this point? No doubt he was. Still André decided he would write and inform him of it; for the detective had given him his address. He lived in the same Rue Montmartre, but a few yards from Martin-Rigal's house.

But time was flying, and André decided to hasten to the mansion M. Gandelu was building in the Champs Elysées, and, in accordance with his plan, ask his friend Vignol to lodge him for a few days. He walked so fast that it was still broad daylight when he arrived, and all the workmen were still about the building. They did not prove as lynx-eyed as Mascarot's agents, for not one of them knew him when he asked for M. Vignol.

"He's up there," they said, "at work on the frieze; take the staircase on the left."

This frieze was the main decorative element in the new building, and it was in front of the central and more important design that the little wooden shanty previously spoken of had been erected. Vignol was there alone when André entered the cabin, and he uttered an exclamation of astonishment when his friend named himself, for he had not recognised him in his disguise. Naturally enough Vignol was eager for an explanation. "Oh, it's nothing of any consequence," replied the young painter carelessly; "only a little love affair."

"Was it to win a girl's heart that you have made such a gny of yourself?" asked his friend, with a laugh.

"Hush! I will explain everything another time," rejoined André. "I came to ask if you could lodge me—"

He stopped short, listened for a moment, and then turned frightfully pale; he fancied he had heard his name, a scream, and then the word "Sabine." He was not mistaken. The same voice, a woman's voice, despairing and desolate—repeated the cry? "André! it is I—Sabine—help!"

With one bound the young painter reached the window of the shanty, opened it and leaned out. Alas! Toto-Chupin had earned the money given him by genial Tantaine. The whole window frame and its supports yielded at the same moment, and André was precipitated into space. The little shanty was certainly sixty or sixty-five feet from the ground; the fall was bound to be a terrible one—and indeed it proved all the more appalling as fully two seconds elapsed between the moment when André was launched forward, and that when his bleeding, mutilated body reached the ground. Two seconds—two centuries of frightful agony—an eternity in which he fully realised the trap into which he had fallen. Death, inevitable death, was there on the pavement below. And during these two seconds of suspense, a world of thought traversed his brain. All his past, from the moment that he had left the hospital of Vendôme, rose as it were before him; and in the future—as a supreme, intolerable pang—he saw Sabine in the arms of the Marquis de Croisenois. His last thought was for her. He dead, who would defend her? Mascarot, the doughty plotter, had won the day!

This frightful fall was witnessed by fully three hundred people—promenaders who habitually hie to the Champs Elysées in the afternoon. At Vignol's shriek of despair they all stopped, and spell-bound with horror, watched André as he was hurled downward in virtue of the laws of gravitation. Falling head foremost, the young painter had first struck against one of the cross beams supporting the scaffolding. From below his hands could be seen desperately clutching at the empty air. He tried to catch

at something—the corner of a plank, the end of a rope—he would have snatched at a bar of red hot iron. But he caught nothing, and fifteen feet lower he was dashed against a stone window-sill, whence he bounded to the first floor of the scaffolding. The planks bent under his weight, and then with a rebound, threw him right across the footway, not on the asphalté fortunately, but on the sandy walk.

A formidable outcry now arose from the crowd, and a compact circle formed around the poor fellow, who lay an inert, unconscious mass, in a pool of blood; but the workmen, headed by Vignol, who had at last made them understand that this stranger was their friend and comrade, André, were soon on the spot, and speedily pushed aside the inquisitive individuals, who just wished to see if a person who had fallen from such a height still breathed. Alas! poor André gave no sign of life. His face was frightfully bruised, his eyes were closed, and a stream of blood poured from his mouth, when Vignol, pale as death, raised his head and supported it on his knee. "Oh, he is dead!" said the bystanders; "he'll never come to!"

But the workmen were not listening—they were deciding among themselves what had best be done. "He must be taken to the Beaujon Hospital," said Vignol at last, "we are clear by."

In the meantime a man had hastened to the nearest police station, and speedily enough some police agents arrived with one of those dreary litters, covered with striped cotton, which are only too often to be met with in the streets of Paris. The sculptors raised their unfortunate comrade, and laid him in the litter, which was at once borne down the Rue de l'Oratoire towards the hospital. It was urgent that poor André should be examined as soon as possible.

Had the crowd been less preoccupied, it would no doubt have found food for some strange conjectures in an incident which occurred just as André fell. A red-bearded commissioner had suddenly darted after a young woman—one of those wretched creatures who sweep the Champs Elysées with their trailing skirts every afternoon and evening. It was she whose shouts had attracted André's attention. At sight of the commissioner coming down on her like a tornado, the woman tried to escape, but he caught her by the arm, exclaiming, "Keep still, and hold your tongue."

His voice, gesture, and look, filled the woman with abject terror, and she at once obeyed him; she neither moved nor spoke. "Now, why did you call out like that?" asked the commissioner.

"I don't know."

"You lie."

"No; I swear it's the truth. A man came to me a minute or two ago, and said to me. 'If you'll call out twice, within an interval of half a minute: 'André, it's I, Sabine! Help! I will give you two louis.' Of course I agreed; whereupon he handed me forty francs, and then I did what he wished."

"And what sort of a man was this?"

"He was tall and old, very shabby and dirty, and wore coloured spectacles. I'm sure I never saw him before."

The commissioner reflected for a moment. "Do you know, you wretch!" he said at last, "that those words you uttered have, perhaps, caused a man's death—the death of the poor fellow who just fell from that house?"

"Well, what did he go there for?" asked the woman.

This stupid indifference so exasperated the commissioner that, without

another word, he dragged the woman towards the nearest policeman and gave her in charge. "Take her to the lock-up," said he, after explaining that his name was Palot, and that he was M. Lecocq's lieutenant. "Don't let her escape on any account. She'll be wanted as a witness at an important trial."

Palot could not conceal from himself that the woman had no doubt spoken the truth. "Plainly enough," thought he, "she didn't know what she was doing, and it was old Tantine who gave her those two louis. He shall pay for this. But, unfortunately, even if the whole gang's hanged, it won't restore this poor fellow's life."

However, Palot hadn't time to indulge in meditation now. He must collect all the evidence he could. How had this accident happened? It was easy to ascertain, for the window-pane had fallen with André, and had broken into several pieces as it reached the pavement. Palot picked up one of the fragments, and the crime which he had already suspected became manifest. The plank had been sawed through on both sides, and still retained traces of the plaster and putty with which the saw-marks had been concealed. This was too important a bit of circumstantial evidence to be neglected, and accordingly Palot called one of the workmen—an intelligent looking fellow—explained the discovery he had just made, and advised him to put the fragments of the window frame in a place of security, as they would surely be needed at the judicial inquiry which was bound to take place.

This duty fulfilled, Palot could at last join the spectators crowding round the spot where André had fallen, but the young wanderer had already been carried away.

The detective looked round, asking himself what course he had now best adopt, in view of obtaining further information, when suddenly on a bench, hard by, he perceived a fellow whom he had often followed in the days when M. Lecocq was still uncertain as to the identity of B. Mascarot, Father Tantine, and Martin-Rigal. This fellow was our young friend, Toto Chapin. He no longer wore his sad attire of a day or two previously, but was clothed from head to foot in the newest raiment. Still, well dressed as he was, he scarcely looked at his ease. His face was livid, his eyes were wild, and his jaw worked convulsively as if seeking for saliva to moisten his parched mouth. These circumstances struck Palot forcibly, and he muttered to himself, "That young blackguard must be the guilty party, and he's frightened at his crime."

The surmise was correct enough. Toto Chapin was struggling against remorse, which with him was quite a new sentiment. In fact he was positively deliberating whether he should not go and give himself up at the nearest police station, not because he thought confession would make his judges more merciful, but because he longed to revenge himself on old Tantine, who had made him an assassin.

Naturally enough, the idea of arresting Toto crossed Palot's mind, but on reflection he decided to abandon it. "By nabbing this scamp," thought he, "I might warn the whole band. Big as Paris may be, we are certain of finding him again sooner or later we need him. Perhaps I even made a mistake in arresting that woman." Accordingly, he returned to his inquiries, and on learning that André had been removed to the Beaujon Hospital, he determined to go there. On his way he began to think of the consequences of the catastrophe. "Good heavens!" he thought, "M. Lecocq will declare I'm not fit to be trusted. I'm disgraced for ever. I knew that this

poor fellow's life hung on a thread, and yet I allowed him to enter an unfinished house. Why, I might just as well have killed him with my own hand."

This Palot was in a great state of apprehension when he reached the hospital, and asked one of the assistant-surgeons what had become of the young man who had been brought there half-an-hour previously. "You mean number seventeen?" said the assistant-surgeon; "he is in a most deplorable state. We fear internal injury—a fracture of the skull—in short, we fear everything."

Sixty-four hours had elapsed, when André at last regained sufficient consciousness to think of his situation. It was in the middle of the night; the large hospital ward was lighted up by a single lamp; still, at a glance, he realised where he was. It seemed to him strange that he was yet alive, and still stranger that he felt no pain. Suffering only returned to him when he tried to turn in his bed, and yet he found he could move his legs and one arm. "How long have I been here?" he asked himself. He tried to think, but his thoughts flickered like those of a man who has been under the influence of chloroform, and he fell asleep.

When he awoke again it was broad daylight, and the ward was full of life and motion. It was the hour when the chief surgeon made his rounds. This chief surgeon, a middle aged man, with a bright, kind face, was going from bed to bed, followed by a score of students—demonstrating and lecturing, and scattering among his patients encouraging words. At last came André's turn, and the surgeon told him that he had a shoulder out of joint, an arm broken in two places, and a deep cut on his head, whilst his whole body was but one large bruise; still he was a lucky fellow to have escaped with such little harm. André listened with only a dim conception of the meaning of the words he heard. With revived reason, remembrance of Sabine had returned to him, and he asked himself, with a sinking heart, what would happen while he lay there in bed.

In his bitter anxiety he was shedding tears, when a stout gentleman with large curly whiskers, a high white neckcloth and a venerable-looking hat—looking for all the world like one of those provincial doctors who, when visiting Paris, make it a point of frequenting the hospitals—suddenly stepped forward from the group of students, and approached his bedside. This stout gentleman leaned over André and whispered, "Janouille." On hearing this name, the password which had been agreed upon by himself and M. Lecoq, the young painter started. "I see that you don't recognise me," said the old gentleman in an undertone.

André could not believe his eyes. The art of disguise became genius when carried to such perfection. "Monsieur Lecoq!" he gasped.

"Hush! who can tell who is watching us? Quick—only two words—I came to tranquillize your mind, which will do more for your recovery than all the medicine you can take. Without committing you in any way, I have seen Monsieur de Mussidan, and have furnished him with a pretext for postponing his daughter's marriage to Monsieur de Croisenois, for another month. In the meantime, you will remain here in comparative safety. Still, be careful. Eat nothing coming from outside, unless it is brought you by some one possessing our password. Some spy might be sent here, so don't confide in any one. M. Gaudelu will no doubt come to see you. His son is in safety. If anything extraordinary happens to you and you wish to write me, apply to the patient in bed on your right hand. He's one of my men. Poor Palot is so grieved about your accident, that I

haven't had courage to scold him. Now good-bye. You will hear from me every day, and you must be prudent and patient."

"I can wait," murmured André, "since I hope!"

"Ah!" murmured Lecoq, as he moved away, "ah! isn't hope the sum total of life?"

XXXIV.

If M. Lecoq advised André to be prudent and patient, and instructed his agents to be exceedingly cautious and discreet, it was because he realised, and willingly admitted, the ability and cunning of the scoundrels he had to deal with. They would scent his supervision from a distance, just as crows scent powder, and he foresaw that at the least sign of danger they would all decamp, each in a different direction. His agents, weary of difficult work which seemed to lead to nothing, had frequently begged him to act, but he had mastered their impatience saying, "It isn't a good plan to chatter or make a noise when a man goes fishing."

Events had proved that he was right in delaying operations. This time the mysterious association of blackmailers had been obliged to unmask itself in prosecuting its final and most complicated scheme. It could already be proved that the leader, who tried to conceal himself under three names, had instigated an assassination. But M. Lecoq preferred not to utilise this circumstance at once. He was desirous of apprehending the whole band. And his investigations had been so secretly conducted, that the association suspected nothing whatever. Yet, B. Mascarot was irremediably lost at the very moment when he considered himself more certain of success than ever.

On the morrow of the accident which had befallen André, he forwarded to the Prefect of Police a most explicit anonymous letter in which he denounced Toto-Chupin's culpability, and furnished sufficient particulars to lead to his apprehension. "Of course," mused he, "Toto will try to turn all the responsibility on Father Tantaine, but the worthy old man no longer exists, and I defy even the police to resuscitate him."

That very morning, indeed, he had lighted a large fire, and burned to the very last thread the rags and tatters he wore whenever he assumed the name of Tantaine for the needs of his dark designs.

He laughed at the success of his ruse as he watched the thick smoke that rose. "Search, my friends," he chuckled. "Toto's accomplice has gone up the chimney!"

The next thing was to get rid of B. Mascarot, which was a more delicate and difficult operation. Tantaine had been an old nomad, and nobody would trouble themselves about him; but Mascarot could not disappear in the same style. He was a man of position, paying considerable rental and large taxes. He was widely known and esteemed in his capacity as a servants' agent. His disappearance would have created a great sensation—the whole neighbourhood would have gossiped about it, and the police would have taken the matter in hand. The simplest thing, therefore, was to make open arrangements for departure, and so the honorable agent began by telling everyone that family affairs and ill health compelled him to dispose of his business, which he would sell for a modest sum. At the same time he searched for a purchaser, found one, and in four-and-twenty hours the whole transaction was completed. Ah! Mascarot had a hard night's work, on the eve of his

successor's entry into possession. Assisted by Beaumarchef, he carried all the papers which filled the private office of the agency into the sanctum of M. Martin-Rigal, the banker. This was accomplished by means of an aperture which the ex-sub-officer had certainly never so much as suspected, and which aperture, pierced at the back of a cupboard, placed Mascaret's bedroom in direct communication with the banker's private office.

When the last scrap of paper had been carried through this huge hole, Mascaret showed his faithful Beaumarchef a pile of bricks and a bag of mortar. The aperture must be filled up. The task was a long and fatiguing one, for neither of them were accustomed to such work. Still at last it was accomplished; all traces of bricks and mortar were effaced, and the bedroom floor was carefully swept and waxed.

Then followed a heart-breaking scene. Beaumarchef had already received a sum of twelve thousand francs, on conditions he started at once for America. The time for his departure had now arrived, and the poor fellow wept bitterly at the thought of leaving his master for good. He had served Mascaret with unflinching devotion, blindly obeyed every order; and as he could not boast any great amount of acumen, a great many suspicious circumstances had escaped him. He had unconsciously had a hand in many a piece of iniquity. However, he turned away with a sad face and drooping moustaches, just as the new "agent," M. Robinet, arrived.

Mascaret was eager to finish the business. The floors of this house seemed to burn his feet. He had annihilated Tantine in order to disincass himself of Toto; but by Tantine, he, the old clerk's soi-disant master, might perhaps be reached, and— who knows?— possibly arrested. Then farewell to his last and best personality, the one he had selected for his old age. However, it was necessary he should explain the machinery of the employment agency to his successor, acquaint him with the rules and usages of the servants' lodging-place attached to the establishment, hand over the books and lists of clients, and generally enable M. Robinet to turn his new investment to account. All this, and some visits to tradespeople in the neighbourhood, occupied the better part of the day, and it was past four o'clock when his trunks were piled upon the roof of a four wheeler which he had sent for. Henceforth, he was to evaporate, pass away out of recollection. On the boards outside, people could already read:

"J. Robinet, successor to B. Mascaret."

Knowing as he did how trifles bear on great events, he drove to the Western Railway Station, and took a seat in a train bound for Rouen. He was suspicious, for he might have been watched, and he had determined not to leave behind him a single clue whereby he could be traced. It was only at Rouen that he ventured to get rid of the trunks and clothes he had taken away with him, and before doing so, he obliterated everything that in his mind could possibly serve as proof against him. At Rouen he abandoned the long black coat, the spectacles, and beard he had worn as an employment agent. He annihilated B. Mascaret just as he had already annihilated Tantine, and when on the morrow he returned to the banking offices in the Rue Montmartre, of the three personalities he had simultaneously assumed for twenty years, there only remained that of Martin Rigal, the father of the pretty coquette Flavia, the respectable, steady old banker with the bald head and closely-shaven face. *En route*, he had not paid any attention to a young man who made the same journey, as himself—a very dark young man, with quick flashing eyes, and a mocking mouth, who looked like a commercial traveller.

On reaching the Rue Montmartre, Mascarot, or rather Martin-Rigal as we shall henceforth call him, tenderly embraced his daughter, and then betook himself to his private room, the key of which never left him. There was here a space of rough brick wall, occupying the place of the aperture which had formerly existed. "This won't do," muttered the banker, "it must be finished with plaster, and then re-papered."

In the meanwhile, he carefully gathered up all the bits of mortar on the floor and threw them into the fire-place, where he pulverised them and mixed them with the cinders. He next swept up the dust, and going down on his hands and knees, rubbed the carpet to efface any spots that remained. Then in front of the space of rough brick wall he placed a cheffonier, which had always stood there in view of concealing the aperture, and which he had been in the habit of moving as he went in and out.

This being accomplished, and having satisfied himself that everything was in order, he sank with a sigh of satisfaction into his arm-chair. After a long period of anxiety, there now came the conviction of absolute security and impunity, and a delicious sensation of beatitude filled his mind. He was gloying in the success achieved by his courage and audacity, when the smiling Hortebize entered the room.

"Now then, sceptic," cried the banker, before the door had fairly closed, "do you still doubt? At last you have fortune within your very grasp. Baptistin and Tantaine are dead, or, rather, they never existed. Baumarchef is on board a transatlantic steamer; La Gaudete will be in London in a week. You can throw away your locket with the poison. The millions belong to us!"

"God grant it!" answered the doctor, piously.

"Has He not granted it already?"

"But you know the saying, 'Never hold-out till you are out of the wood.'"

"Pshaw! We have nothing more to fear; and you would say the same if you knew all the points of the case as well as myself. Who was the enemy we had most reason to fear? André. Well, he's not dead, to be sure, but he is laid up for a month or more, and that's enough. Besides that, he has given up the contest. The day before yesterday I received a report from one of our men, who succeeded in getting into the Beaujon Hospital, and he assures me that the young artist has not received a visit nor written a line during the whole fortnight that has elapsed since he regained consciousness."

"He had friends, though."

"Have you any friends who would trouble themselves about you after a misfortune and a fortnight's absence? Your simplicity is refreshing! Who are these friends you speak about? Monsieur de Breuille-Faverlay? But the racing season has begun, and he doesn't move from his stables. Madame de Bois d'Ardon? Why the new spring fashions are enough to fill her empty brain. Monsieur Gaudelu? His son is enough to keep him occupied. There is no one else of any consequence."

"And young Monsieur Gaudelu?"

"He has yielded to Tantaine's advice, my friend; he is reconciled with the charming Rose, and they have both taken flight for Florence."

Favourable as were these tidings they did not altogether dispel the cloud on the doctor's brow. "The Mussidan family worries me," said he.

"And why, pray? Croisenois has been relieved in a very courteous manner, I assure you. I don't say that Mademoiselle Sabine has fallen

into his arms, but every evening she thanks him graciously for the bouquet he sends her every morning. What more can you expect?"

"I should have preferred no postponement of Sabine's marriage with our friend the marquis. Why did M. de Mussidan postpone it? I must confess this point worries me exceedingly."

"It's annoying, certainly. But his reasons were not pretences. I thoroughly investigated everything. We must wait; that's all."

The banker soon succeeded in infusing his own confidence into Dr. Hortebize, and the latter finally expressed himself as satisfied.

"Everything is going on well respecting the Tifla Mines," resumed Martin-Rigal. "The subscribers are not at all reluctant. It's true, I haven't been too hard on them. I have taxed each one according to his means, from a thousand up to twenty thousand francs, and we are already promised at least a million."

"And with us," murmured the doctor, "promising means something."

"Precisely; none of these folks will have their compromising papers back unless they pay up. Why, when it's all settled, doctor, you'll have at least a million francs for your own share."

The doctor rubbed his hands at this magic word. A million! What an infinite prospect of delicious dinners and exquisite joys of all kinds.

"I have seen Catenao," resumed Martin-Rigal, "since he returned from Vendôme, where everything was carried out as I ordered and predicted. The Duke de Champdoce is wild with impatience and hope, and eager to follow the track which he thinks will take him to his son. Ah! doctor, I look on this false trail as my *chef-d'œuvre*. The idea is well worth the price it will bring us in. But then what trouble we had to perfect the scheme. The late Father Taintain and the defunct Mascaret did not spare themselves in the task."

"And Perpignan? You said he was cunning."

The banker shrugged his shoulders with profound contempt. "Perpignan," said he, "is duped just as much as the duke. He imagines that he himself has discovered this trail leading from the Hospice de Vendôme to Paul. The day before yesterday they interviewed Vigoureux, the ex-mountebank, at his wine shop in the Rue Dupleix. Very shortly he'll give them the address of old Fritz, the musician, and before long, we shall see the whole party arrive here. But by that time Paul will be my daughter's husband and Flavia will become Duchess de Champdoce, with an income of six hundred thousand livres."

He checked himself, for at this very moment there was a gentle tap at the door, and Flavia entered. Flavia was very pretty, but her beauty had never been so great as in these days of hope and joy, when she fancied she had won the heart of the man she loved, and would soon become his wife. She bowed to the doctor in a cordial, friendly way, and then, lightly as a bird perches on a branch, she seated herself on her father's knees, and putting her arms round his neck, kissed him again and again.

Hortebize looked on, and although the sight was no new one to him, he was astonished to see how the banker changed under the influence of these sweet caresses. It was, indeed, almost impossible to recognise him as the same man who, ten minutes before, had spoken with cool indifference of a murder he had planned. As soon as Flavia appeared, a most singular change took place in him; all the keen intelligence of his features vanished, and in lieu thereof came an expression of admiring, beatified simplicity. "Oh, oh!" said he, gaily, "this is a very nice little proface, my dear. The

favour is granted, for of course you have one to ask—have you not, my darling?”

Mademoiselle Flavia shook her head, and in the same tone that she would have used towards a naughty child, exclaimed, “Oh! what a bad papa! Am I in the habit, sir, of selling you my kisses? When I want anything, is it necessary for me to say more than that I want it?”

“No, of course not; only—”

“I merely came to tell you that dinner is ready, and that Paul and I are both very hungry—and I only kissed you because I love you. Yes, I love you because you are good—yes, if I had to choose a father from among all the fathers in the world, I should choose you!”

He smiled, half-closing his eyes like a cat does when her head is scratched. “Come,” said he, “confess it. During the last six weeks, you have loved me a little bit more than you used to do.”

“No,” she answered, “not during the last six weeks only since a fortnight or so.”

“And yet it is more than a month since our good friend, the doctor, brought a certain young man to dinner for the first time.”

Flavia laughed—a pretty, frank, girlish laugh. “I loved you for that,” she replied, “yes, very dearly, indeed; but I love you more for something else.”

“And what’s that?”

“Ah! that’s a secret which mustn’t be told.”

“Oh, come now, let me coax it out of you.”

“How anxious you are! And besides it would make you angry.”

“No, it wouldn’t, I’m sure.”

“Well, I’ll tell you then. It is only during the last fortnight that I have realised all your love for me. Poor, dear papa! Ah! I cried when I knew all the pains you took to please your naughty daughter, when I realised all the difficulties you had to contend against to bring me my dear artist. To think you put on those wretched clothes, that horrid beard, and those spectacles! Ah, how awfully ugly you looked, poor papa!”

Martin-Rigal at these words started so abruptly to his feet, that Flavia was nearly thrown on to the floor. He was deadly pale. “What on earth do you mean?” he stammered.

“Do you suppose a father can impose on a daughter? Others may not have recognised you, but I—”

“I don’t understand you, Flavia.”

“Do you mean to say,” she asked, fixing her eyes upon him, “that you did not come in disguise one day to Paul’s, when I was there myself?”

“You are crazy—listen to me.”

“No, papa, I’m nearly as cunning as you are. When you came to Paul’s, in spite of your ragged clothes, I had a vague suspicion, a presentiment; and when you went out with the doctor I listened at the door, and heard a few words you said. And that is not all, for when I came home I hid myself in the passage, and I saw you come into this very room.”

The banker no longer thought of denying. He seemed overwhelmed. “Ah,” murmured he, “this is the result of a single act of imprudence. It was necessary to get in doors—into Mascarot’s office. Croisenois was waiting for me and I feared his suspicions.” Then suddenly, as a terrible idea crossed his mind, he eagerly asked, “But, Flavia, you have said nothing to any one—”

“No, indeed—certainly not.”

He breathed again.

"Of course I don't count Paul," she added; "but he is the same as myself."

"Unfortunate child!" cried Martin-Rigal. "Unfortunate child!"

His gesture was so terrible, his voice so threatening, that for the first time in her life Flavia felt afraid of her father. "But what have I done?" she asked, with tears in her eyes. "I only said to Paul: 'Dear Friend—We should be monsters of ingratitude if we did not worship my father. You do not know what he does for us. He even dressed in rags to go and find you out, and—'"

The doctor, who had hitherto been a mute spectator of the scene, now interrupted Flavia: "And what did Paul say?" he asked.

"Paul? Oh! he stood still, looking quite confused for a moment, and then he shook his head, saying, 'I understand!' At last he began to laugh as if he would kill himself."

The banker, who was walking up and down the room in a state of great agitation, now stopped before his daughter. "And you, poor child," he said, in a bitter tone, "didn't you understand the meaning of that laugh? Paul, at this very moment, thinks you have been my accomplice. You have shown him that it was in obedience to your orders that I went in search of him."

"Well, what then?"

"Alas! a man like Paul would never love a woman who has sought after him. No matter how great her beauty and her love for him, he would always think and say that she threw herself at his head. He will accept all tokens of tenderness and devotion, and make no more return for them than if he were a wooden idol, before which worshippers burn incense. You don't see this? God grant that this bandage may never fall from your eyes! Can you not yet read the character of this poor, foolish boy, who lacks every manly quality! who is inflated by vanity, who has neither energy nor independence, nor will nor heart?"

Flavia had flushed scarlet. "Enough!" she exclaimed, interrupting her father, "enough! I am not such a coward as to allow you to insult my husband. I will defend him against all comers, even against my father."

Martin-Rigal shuddered at the thought that his words might cost him his daughter's affection, and he was asking himself how he could manage to attenuate the effect of his fit of anger, when Hortebize interposed. The doctor put his arm round Flavia's waist, and hurried her from the room. Then, when he was alone with the banker again, he exclaimed, "I really can't understand your anger. At the outset it depended on you yourself to prevent this marriage ever taking place. You lacked the courage to do so. Why? That's no business of mine. However, at the present hour, recreation is quite out of place."

Martin Rigal was in consternation. "You speak as if it were nothing," said he; "but here I am at the discretion of this miserable Paul."

"Not more, it seems to me, than before your daughter's indiscretion. Isn't Paul our accomplice? Are we any the more compromised because he has penetrated the mystery of your triple personality?"

"Ah! your are not Flavia's father! Paul until now believed that I did not know Mascaret, and that I was a victim of blackmailing. All my strength was in that. As a dupe he respected me—I held him; but as an accomplice he escapes me! I think we must hasten this disastrous marriage

as well as the Duke de Champdoce's search. Let's go to dinner. The evil can't be remedied. I'll write to Catenac to-morrow."

The marriage took place at the end of the next week, and Paul left his simple bachelor abode to take possession of the magnificent suite of rooms prepared for him by the banker under his own roof. The transition was abrupt, but Paul was no longer astonished at anything. The suppleton was so imbued with Mascarot's and Hortebize's theories that he imagined that adventures like his own were common in Paris. And he reflected with admiration how easy and how profitable it is to be dishonest. He had not a shadow of remorse. He feared only one thing - that he might make some blunder and fail, when came the decisive scene which was to give him a high social position and a dual title. He longed for that moment to arrive, and flushed with pleasure when one day Martin-Rigal said to him, "Gather your strength together. It will be for this evening."

"Oh, I'll be brave," replied Paul. And, indeed, when in the course of the evening the Duke de Champdoce appeared, accompanied by Perpignan and Catenac, the young impostor rose to the level of his masters, and played his difficult part with consummate skill. However, he might have been clumsy had he chosen. The duke would have detected nothing. This man, whose life had been one long agony, was as if sieved with vertigo. Had his wishes been complied with, Paul would have at once established himself with his wife at the Champdoce mansion. But here Martin-Rigal interposed with objections.

The banker pretended to be only moderately pleased at finding that his son-in-law was a marquis and ten times a millionaire. He objected that it was very late, and that the Duchess de Champdoce was no doubt hardly prepared for the emotion the recovery of her son would cause her. Finally it was agreed that the duke should come and lunch the next morning at Martin-Rigal's, and that afterwards he should take his son away with him.

The appointment was fixed for eleven o'clock, but it was only ten when the Duke de Champdoce was ushered into the banker's private room, where the master of the house, Catenac, Hortebize and Paul were already assembled in council. Almost immediately behind the duke came Flavia. She had no suspicion of this ignoble comedy, and she thought that her husband was the only heir of a great house filled her with joy. It was not that she was dazzled by a title, but she saw in all this the justification of her choice. "Come now," she had said to her father, whom she kept on thorns by her enthusiastic expressions of delight, "you can laugh no more at me for loving a poor Bohemian. You see that this artist is a Champdoce, and that his father possesses millions!"

She entered her father's room on tiptoe, and stood near the door with a smile on her pretty lips. The Duke de Champdoce was sitting on the sofa by the side of Paul, whose hand he held and whom he fully believed to be his son. He was relating what an anxious night he had passed. He had wished to prepare the duchess, his wife, for this great joy, all the more unexpected by her as he had concealed his investigations from her; and yet a few words of vague, faint hope, had now sufficed almost to imperil her life. "This morning," he added, "she is better, and she hopes."

He was abruptly interrupted. A succession of loud quick thuds could be heard against one of the walls. "Dear me," said M. de Champdoce, "the neighbours don't seem to be very particular."

Certainly not, indeed. They were evidently attacking this wall with pickaxes, without the least care for what other people might think. The

the house shook, and the stack of drawers standing against the wall visibly oscillated. The three honourable partners had become livid, and looked at each other in consternation. It was clear to them that some one was attacking the brick work raised by B. Mascarot and Beaumarchef. Why was this being done? The lack of all precautions seemed to indicate that the men at work considered they had a perfect right to demolish this brick work, and yet it was difficult to imagine that anyone possessed such a right.

The Duke de Champloce was amazed. The terror of the three accomplices was perfectly evident; he felt Paul's hand tremble in his own, and he could not understand why these blows on the wall should cause such fright. Flavia was the only one who suspected no evil, and accordingly she said, "We must ascertain the reason of this noise."

"I will send and see," said her father, rising to his feet.

But hardly had he opened the door than he started back with dilated eyes, contracted features, and extended arms, as if to ward off a terrible apparition. In the passage beyond stood a most respectable looking gentleman, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, and behind him appeared a commissary of police, wearing his scarf of office, with half a dozen agents in the rear. The same name came to the lips of the three associates: "Monsieur Lecoq!" And at the same time this terrible conviction entered their brains: "We are lost!"

The famous detective advanced, curiously watching the strange scene before him. His countenance, despite its gravity, evinced something similar to the intense satisfaction which a dramatist feels when he beholds his master-scene--conceived and combined in the seclusion of his work-room--admirably rendered on the stage. "Eh, eh!" said he, "I knew very well that by making a noise against yonder wall I should bring some one out in this direction."

But already, thanks to a mighty effort of will, the banker had succeeded in regaining at least a semblance of self-possession. "What do you want?" asked he in an arrogant tone. "What is the meaning of this violation of a private residence?"

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders. "Here," said he, "is the commissary of police, who will explain that point to you. In the meanwhile, I—I arrest you, yes, you—Martin Rigal, *alias* Tantine, *alias* Mascarot, formerly an employment agent in the Rue Montorgueil."

"I don't understand you."

"Indeed! Do you think that Tantine has so thoroughly washed his hands that not one drop of André's blood clings to the fingers of Martin Rigal?"

"Upon my life, I don't comprehend."

Lecoq smiled blandly, and drawing from his pocket a neatly folded letter, he rejoined, "You are probably familiar with your daughter's handwriting. Well, then, listen to what she wrote, not a month ago, to Monsieur Paul, here present. 'Dear Friend—We should be monsters of ingratitude if we did not worship my father—'"

"Enough!" interrupted the banker in a hoarse voice, "enough!" And no longer having sufficient energy to remain erect, he sank into an arm-chair, stammering, "Lost! Lost by her—by my child—by Flavia!"

Of the three accomplices, individually so different in temperament and character, the calmest now was the one who usually was the most readily alarmed—smiling Dr. Hortebize. On recognising M. Lecoq, the worthy doctor had drawn from the locket dangling on his watch-chain a little pill-

the ball of grey paste, which he held in the hollow of his hand. With his eyes fixed on Martin-Rigal, it seemed as if, before despairing, he were waiting for this chieftain, of so many and such tried resources, to declare that all was really lost.

However, leaving the banker, the detective had now turned towards Catenac. "And you, too," said he; "in the name of the law I arrest you!"

"I? What do you mean?"

"Your name is Catenac, I believe? You are an advocate?"

Perhaps, precisely for that very reason that he was an advocate, Catenac did not deign to answer M. Lecoq. It was to the commissary of police that he replied, "I am the victim of a most deplorable error; but I enjoy sufficient consideration at the Palais de Justice for you not to hesitate..."

"At all events," interrupted the commissary, "the warrant against you is in regular form. I could show it to you, if you choose."

"That's not worth while. I will merely beg you to conduct me at once before the magistrate who signed it. In less than five minutes I shall have justified myself."

"Do you think so?" asked M. Lecoq in a bantering tone. "You are ignorant, I see, of the event which caused such a sensation at La Varenne, in the environs of Paris, only two days ago. Some labourers engaged in opening a trench discovered the body of a new-born child wrapped in a silk handkerchief and an old shawl. The police, having been warned, lost no time, and they already have the mother, a girl named Clarisse."

If Lecoq had not restrained him, the advocate would have flown at Martin-Rigal's throat. "Scoundrel!" he yelled. "Traitor! Coward! You have sold me—"

"Ah!" stammered the banker, "my papers have been stolen."

He now realised that the blows struck on the other side of the wall were but a ruse. M. Lecoq had wished to frighten the confederates, so as to crush them the more easily.

"The papers!" grumbled an agent. "There was a hole in the wall; we profited by it."

Worthy Dr. Hortebize no longer smiled. The game was lost, ay, irremediably lost. "I have honest relatives who bear my name," he thought. "I will not dishonour them. There is no time to lose." Whereupon he swallowed the contents of his medallion, muttering to himself, "At my age, and with such a digestion, too! Never was I in better health! Ah! it would have been better if I had contented myself with a decent little medical practice."

No one noticed the doctor. M. Lecoq had just had the chaffonier moved aside, and he was showing the commissary of police the rough brick wall through which a hole, sufficiently large for a man to pass, had now been pierced. But a sudden noise cut his explanations short. Dr. Hortebize had fallen on the floor in terrible convulsions. "How stupid!" exclaimed M. Lecoq; "how stupid of me not to have foreseen that! He has taken poison! He escapes us! Run for a doctor! Put him on a bed at once!"

While these orders were being hastily obeyed, the banker and Catenac were led downstairs to a cab, which awaited them in the street. Martin-Rigal seemed struck by imbecility. His mind, so powerful for purposes of evil, had apparently given way beneath the weight of mortal anguish. "And my daughter," he stammered, "Flavia! What will become of her? She has no fortune, and she is married to a man who cannot even earn his living. My child! my child! Will she herself always have bread?"

The commissary of police leaving to superintend the removal of Dr. Hortebize, M. Lecoq now remained alone with the Duke de Champdoce, Paul, and Flavia. The poor young woman had seen her father led away by the police agents without having force to say a word. She was stretched helplessly in an arm-chair, and the wild light in her eyes told that her mind was wandering. She could not believe in the reality of the horrible scene which had just been enacted.

For a moment the celebrated detective looked at her with an air of compassion which was certainly not feigned. He was reluctant to strike another blow—a more terrible one than all the others—at this poor child, who, being innocent, was necessarily the greatest sufferer. However, time was passing, in the interests of justice the truth could not be deferred, and so he approached the Duke de Champdoce, who seemed to have been struck dumb with surprise. “I must warn you, Monsieur le Duc,” said M. Lecoq, “that you have been odiously imposed upon. This young man here is not your son. His name is Paul Violaine, and his mother, originally a poor work-girl at Châtelleraunt, kept a petty thread and needle shop at Poitiers during the last years of her life.”

Hard as was this blow for Paul, he still tried to continue playing his part—he began to bluster and deny; but at a sign from M. Lecoq, an agent ushered in a young woman most fashionably attired. Paul recognised at once his discarded mistress—Rose, and without even letting her speak, he confessed everything. “It is true,” he stammered, bursting into tears. “I was persuaded, threatened, led away. I did not know how to resist; forgive me!”

With a disdainful gesture M. Lecoq repelled him. “It is not of me you should ask forgiveness,” said he, “but of this poor young woman, your wife, who is dying, I think.”

The Duke de Champdoce had entered the banker's house with a joyful heart, and now he was about to leave it in a state of despair, when the celebrated detective suddenly led him aside. “Let me tell you, Monsieur le Duc,” said he, “these scoundrels have only half deceived you. The child you seek exists, and they know him. But I know him also, and to-morrow I Lecoq—will take you to him!”

XXXV.

OBEDIENT to the instructions of his new protector, André had resigned himself to wait patiently at the Beaujon Hospital for the finish of the great game which M. Lecoq was playing on his behalf. Moreover, he had enough courage to assume that air of utter indifference for the future which had duped B. Mascarot's spies. It is true that he received all the comfort and solace possible under the circumstances. Every day his neighbour on the right hand side—the patient whom M. Lecoq pointed out as one of his agents—stealthily slipped into his hand a note acquainting him with the march of events. André read these notes in secret, and then carefully destroyed them.

But time was rolling on, the days seemed interminable; and as the decisive moment approached, André was beginning to lose patience, when, one afternoon, his neighbour openly handed him a note which thrilled his heart with joy. “We are winning the fight,” wrote Lecoq; “all danger is over. Ask the surgeon to sign your permission to leave. Make yourself

a swell, and to-morrow morning, at nine o'clock, you will find me waiting for you outside the hospital door."

André had not yet fully recovered. He must still carry his arm in a sling for several weeks to come; but no consideration of this kind would have deterred him from complying with the detective's instructions. Rising at an early hour on the morrow, he arrayed himself in his best clothes, which he had sent for, and then, after taking leave of the Sisters of Charity, who had carefully tended him, he went downstairs, crossed the courtyard of the hospital, and passed into the Faubourg St. Honoré beyond. He remained for a moment on the threshold of the great entrance-gateway, inhaling the fresh air with delight. The day before he had still suffered from his wounds; but now he forgot them, as if he had been touched by some magic wand. Never had he felt so young, so strong and lithe; never had his heart palpitated so intensely with hope. However, he was surprised not to see his new protector, and he was deliberating as to what he had better do, when an open vehicle, drawn by a fast trotter, dashed up the Faubourg and stopped just in front of the hospital. André at once recognised the respectable-looking old gentleman with gold spectacles who was seated inside, and so, hastening towards him, he exclaimed, "Thank Heaven you have come, sir. I was beginning to feel very anxious."

"You are right!" said M. Lecoq, consulting his watch. "I am five minutes behind time, but I was detained at the Prefecture." Then as André began to thank him most effusively, he added, "Jump in beside me. I want to talk to you; the weather's delightful; we'll go as far as the Bois."

As he took his seat beside the detective, André was struck by the unusual expression of his features, as a rule so placid and composed; and feeling anxious, he ventured to ask, "Has anything unfavourable occurred, sir?"

"Not in the least."

"I was afraid."

"Ah, I see, you detect a strange expression in my face? It may be so, for I'm tired out. I've spent the night looking over Mascaret's papers. And, besides, I have just witnessed a most painful scene—one of the most painful of my life, and yet I have seen a good many strange and terrible things in my time." He shook his head, as if he hoped to dispel the impression, and then resumed. "Martin-Rigal's reason has not resisted this catastrophe. This villain had one sublime passion, he adored his daughter. Suddenly separated from her, knowing her to be without fortune, and married to a fellow with a worthless character, Rigal has given way to the delirium of despair and become mad. He will go to an asylum instead of to the galleys. He escapes the punishment of man, but not the punishment of God, and this last is the more terrible."

"Martin-Rigal mad!" muttered André.

"Yes; and do you know what form his madness has taken? He imagines that Paul and Flavia are without resources, without shelter, without bread. He fancies that Paul means to speculate on his wife's beauty, and live on the fruits of her shame. He thinks he can hear his daughter constantly crying to him for help. Yes, he hears this voice—a bitter, pleading, agonising voice. Then he calls for the gaolers, and on his knees implores them to let him out only for a day, an hour, swearing he will return as soon as he has rescued his child from infamy and shame. And when his prayer is refused he becomes frenzied, he wounds himself in trying to

loosen the window bars and break the locks. This morning he had to be fastened on his bed, where I just saw him making vain efforts to free himself. I saw him with his features frightfully convulsed, with his eyes starting from their orbits, with a foaming mouth, and howling like a wild beast. He recognised me and exclaimed, 'Do you hear Flavia's voice?' And this agony, mind, will perhaps last for years, the doctor told me so. Until his death he will unceasingly hear his daughter's despairing voice. Each minute of the years to come will contain more intolerable torture for him than he ever inflicted on all his victims."

A pause followed. André could not help pitying this scoundrel, although he had tried to have him murdered, and had endeavoured to rob him of Sabine.

"You see," resumed M. Lecoq, "the battle is won. Dr. Hortebize is agonising. The poison which he relied on as instantaneous has betrayed him, and his sufferings have already lasted twenty-four hours. Catenac is trying to hold his own, but he will be convicted of infanticide or complicity therein, and will at the least have ten years' hard labour. Martin-Rigal's papers have furnished me with proofs against Perpignan, Van Klopen, and Verminet, who will all serve out a comfortable sentence. Toto-Chupin's fate is not yet settled. We shall remember that he came and surrendered himself, and shows very great repentance."

But all this did not fully reassure André. "And Croisenois?" he asked timidly.

The detective repressed a smile. "Ah, ha!" said he, "you are not confident in me, I see."

"Oh! I assure you, sir—"

"Well, don't be nervous, I promised you that the Count de Mussidan's name should not be mentioned in the matter, and so I have allowed Croisenois to escape me. Last night he slept at Brussels, at the Hôtel de Saxe, room No. 9. The Tifila Mining Company will be treated as an ordinary swindle. No funds have been paid in so far; the promised subscriptions will be returned to the persons they emanate from, and Croisenois will be sentenced by default to a couple of months' imprisonment. Finally, tomorrow young Gandelu will have his notes of hand returned to him."

The vehicle had been rolling through the Bois de Boulogne; and now M. Lecoq made a sign to the coachman to turn and go back. "The time has come, Monsieur André," said he, "to explain to you why, at our first interview, I saluted you as the Duke de Champdocé. I had guessed your history, but only last night did I learn its details."

And without waiting for a reply he rapidly analysed, for André's benefit, the voluminous manuscript prepared by B. Mascarot, and read aloud by Paul. He did not tell everything, however. He concealed as far as possible the crimes and faults of the Duke de Champdocé and Madame de Mussidan. He wished to spare André the pain of loathing or ceasing to respect his father and Sabine's mother.

The detective had managed his narrative so well, that he had just brought it to a conclusion when the coachman drew up at the corner of the Rue de Matignon. "Now, just alight here," said M. Lecoq; "and take care of your arm." André mechanically obeyed. "Now," resumed the detective, turning towards the carriage again, "listen to me. The Count and Countess de Mussidan are expecting you to lunch. Here is the invitation they requested me to give you. However, don't linger too long near Mademoiselle Sabine. At four o'clock be at your studio, and I will then

have the honour of presenting you to your father. Until then not one word."

The young painter wished to speak and express his gratitude; but before he was able to do so M. Lecoq's driver had whipped his horse, and the vehicle rolled rapidly away. So much happiness overwhelmed the young artist. Everything came to him at once—a great name, an immense fortune, and the girl he loved. However, he gathered himself together, and walked with a firm step towards the entrance of the Hôtel de Mussidan. He wondered how he would be received. Would M. de Mussidan remember his promises, or the peril no longer existing? Would he merely frigidly express his thanks? The respectful manner of the servants made him judge that he was expected and recommended. This was of good augury, and yet, in the hall, when the head valet asked him his name, he could hardly articulate it. The door of the grand salon was thrown open, and he staggered as he crossed the threshold, for there on the opposite wall was Sabine's portrait, the portrait which he himself had painted. How came it there? Fortunately, the Count de Mussidan understood the young artist's embarrassment, and came towards him with extended hands. Then leading him towards the countess, he exclaimed, "Diane, this is our daughter's husband."

André bowed low, while words of gratitude rose confusedly to his lips; but the count had already led him to where Sabine stood, and putting his hand in her's, resumed in a feeling voice, "If happiness, here below, is a reward, you will be happy."

It was only after a moment's pause that André recovered sufficient self-possession to look at Mademoiselle de Mussidan. Poor child, she was but the shadow of her former self—she had suffered so intensely during that long month when she had forced herself to receive the homage of the Marquis de Croisenois, and smile to him. "Oh darling!" whispered André in her ear, "how terribly you must have suffered."

"Yes," she said, quietly, "I should certainly have died if it had lasted longer."

Ah! the young artist needed great courage to keep his secret from Sabine during the delightful afternoon he spent near her, during the glowing hours when she told him what had been her anguish and her hopes; and it was only with a superhuman effort that he tore himself away at half-past three o'clock.

He had not been five minutes in his studio when he heard a knock at the door. He opened it, and M. Lecoq entered, followed by an old gentleman of somewhat haughty mien. This was the Duke de Champdoce—Norbert! "Monsieur," said the duke to André, without a preamble, "you know the reasons that bring me here. You know who you are, and who I am—"

André bowed affirmatively.

"This gentleman," resumed the duke, indicating M. Lecoq, "has told you under what deplorable circumstances I abandoned you—my son. I will not try to excuse myself—though I have cruelly expiated this crime. Look at me, I am only forty-eight years of age."

He looked sixty at the least, and André was able to form some idea of what this man, his father, must have suffered.

"My fault follows me still," continued M. de Champdoce. "To-day, although it is my dearest wish, I cannot claim you as my son. The law only allows me to give you my name and fortune by adoption."

The young painter remained silent; and the duke at last resumed, with

evident hesitation, "You can of course institute proceedings against me; but in that case I must say—I must confess—"

"Ah! Monsieur," interrupted André, "what can you imagine my feelings to be? What! Before assuming your name, which is mine as well, do you think I should try to dishonour it?"

The duke breathed more freely. André's manner had chilled him. What a difference there was between the young painter's haughty reserve, and the pathetic scene enacted by Paul, the day before!

"However, Monsieur le Duc," resumed André, "before anything else. I must ask you to allow me to address you a few observations?"

"Observations?"

"Yes. I did not dare to say conditions—but I think you will understand me. For instance, I have never had a master. My independence has cost me enough for me to cling to it. I am a painter, and for nothing in the world can I ever renounce art."

"You will always be your own master," rejoined the duke.

Just as the latter had hesitated a moment earlier, so André hesitated now. He had become very red. "This is not all," he said: "I love a young lady and am loved by her. Our marriage is arranged, and I think—"

"I think," interrupted the duke, "that you can only love a woman who is worthy of our name."

As André heard this he smiled sadly. "But I was a nobody yesterday," said he, softly. "However, you may be at ease, monsieur, she is worthy of a Champdocé, both by her fortune and by her name. From a social point of view she was far above me. She is—the daughter of the Count de Mussidan!"

At the mention of this name M. de Champdocé turned livid. "Never!" he cried, "never! I would rather see you dead than see you become Mademoiselle de Mussidan's husband."

"And I, sir, would suffer ten thousand deaths rather than renounce her!"

"If I refused my consent—however—if I forbade—"

André sadly shook his head. "Paternal authority," said he, "is acquired only by long years of protection and affection. I owe you nothing. Forget me, as you have hitherto done. Follow your road, and I will follow mine."

The Duke de Champdocé remained silent. A frightful struggle was going on in his mind. He bitterly realised that either he must renounce this son, so miraculously restored to him, or else he must see him married to Diane's daughter. Both alternatives seemed to him equally terrible. "Never!" he muttered at last; "besides, the countess would never consent. She hates me as much as I hate her."

M. Lecocq, who had looked on in silence, now thought it time to interfere. "I will undertake," said he, "to obtain Madame de Mussidan's consent."

O. "The duke no longer resisted. He opened his arms
And y son, let it all be as you desire."
B. "I saw himself from the embrace to give f.
cou. stilling him. "My mother!" he cried,
pres. me to my mother."

The

the son for whom she had so often wept,

